

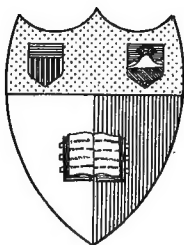


THE  
DESPOT  
OF  
BROOMS-  
EDGE  
COVE



(CHARLES  
(GERT  
(RADDOCK





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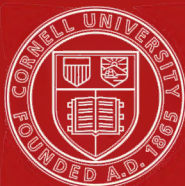
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THE  
DESPOT OF BROOMSEDGE  
COVE

BY

CHARLES EGBERT CRADDOCK

AUTHOR OF "IN THE CLOUDS," "DOWN THE RAVINE," "IN THE TENNESSEE  
MOUNTAINS," "THE PROPHET OF THE GREAT SMOKY  
MOUNTAINS," ETC.



BOSTON AND NEW YORK  
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## THE DESPOT OF BROOMSEDGE COVE.



### I.

ON a certain steep and savage slope of the Great Smoky Mountains, the primeval wilderness for many miles is unbroken save by one meagre clearing. The presence of humanity upon the earth is further attested only by a log cabin, high on the rugged slant. At night the stars seem hardly more aloof than the valley below. By day the mountains assert their solemn vicinage, an austere company. The clouds that silently commune with the great peaks, the sinister and scathing deeds of the lightnings, the passionate rhetoric of the thunders, the triumphal pageantry of the sunset-tides, and the wistful yearnings of the dawn aspiring to the day, — these might seem the only incidents of this lonely and exalted life. So august is this mountain scheme that it fills all the visible world with its massive multitudinous presence; still stretching out into the dim blue distances an infinite perspective of peak and range and lateral spur, till one may hardly believe that the fancy does not juggle with the fact.

One day a sound impinged suddenly upon its impressive silence, — faint and far, but even in the echo charged with alien suggestions; not akin to the woods or the waters, to the cry of beast or of bird; subtly at variance with the mountain solitude, imposed upon it, neither of its essence nor its outgrowth. A soul informed the sound, for it was the voice of a man singing aloud in the wilderness, — sing-

ing with so ecstatic a fervor, with tones so robust and full, that distant peaks were voiced with fugue-like feignings, rising to sudden outbursts and sinking to silence, as the melody waxed or waned. It swung and swayed in rhythmic cadences across the valley. It might have seemed a spirit in the air, for with the hymning echoes it was hard to say whence it came. But two mountaineers, standing beside the fence of the little cornfield in the clearing, gazed expectantly up the road, that, precarious and rocky, ran along the verge of the slope. For the song grew louder and more distinct, and presently in its midst was heard the beat of rapid hoofs. A moment more, and the young psalmist came around a curve, galloping recklessly down beneath the fringed boughs of the firs and the pines, still singing aloud ; the reins upon his horse's neck, his rifle held across the pommel of the saddle, his broad hat thrust upon the back of his head, his eyes scarcely turning toward the men that stood by the wayside.

He had evidently not intended to stop, but one of them threw up his arm and hailed him.

"Hy're, Teck ! hold up !"

The rider drew rein. The rapt expression of his countenance abruptly changed. He fixed imperative, worldly eyes upon the speaker. They were deeply set, of a dark blue color, full of a play of expression, and despite the mundane intimations of the moment they held the only suggestions in his face of a spiritual possibility. He had a heavy lower jaw, stern and insistent. A firm, immobile mouth disclosed strong, even teeth. His nose was slightly aquiline, and he had definitely marked black eyebrows. His short dark beard, worn after the manner common in the region, and the usual brown jeans garb, lent his face no similarity to the faces of the others. There was a strong individuality, magnetism, about him, and before his glance the peremptory spirit of his interlocutor was slightly abated. It was only after he had demanded, "What ye want?" that he was asked in turn, —



"Whar ye been?"

"Been a-huntin'," said Teck Jepson. He laid one hand upon the barrel of his rifle on the pommel of his saddle, as if to call attention to it.

"Did n't ye get nuthin'?"

"Naw. I tuk ter studyin' 'bout'n the Bible, an' a-singin', an' I warn't a-goin' ter thwart the sperit. I ain't tuk aim this day."

There was so obvious a pride in this statement that it imposed upon the others as a valid source of satisfaction.

They all looked meditatively at the spaces of the sunlit valley for a moment. The shadow of a great wing flickered by. A cow-bell jangled from the slope below.

"Waal, I expec' Ben hyar mought hev his say-so 'bout'n studyin' on the Bible, jes' in the time fur pullin' fodder," suggested Eli Strobe.

He was the constable of the district, a heavy, thick-set fellow, forty years of age, perhaps, and of medium height. He had a large head and a certain lowering side glance, barely lifting the lids of his slow dark eyes with a sullen, bovine expression. He carried himself in a deliberate pondering manner, and with distinct aggressiveness. He wore his broad black wool hat pulled far over his brow. His boots were drawn to the knee over his blue jeans trousers, and were graced with large spurs. His features were straight and regular, handsome in their way, and his face was characterized by a sort of surly dignity. He stood sturdily in the road, with his hands in his pockets, and looked up from under the brim of his hat at the horseman.

Jepson lifted his head loftily. "I'd ruther be in the wilderness with the sperit than with the gleaners in the richest fields o' the yearth!"

Despite a sanctimonious twang imitated from the circuit rider, his voice in speaking betokened his gift in song. It was rich and low, and as smooth as velvet.

The constable, at a spiritual disadvantage, recanted with

acerbity. "I reckon so! E annybody else would, too. Ye talk ez ef nobody hed n't no religion but yerse'f."

"Laws-a-massy!" exclaimed Jepson's half-brother, Ben Bowles. "Laws-a-massy! whenst Teck gits ter studyin' 'bout the Bible-folks, I 'd jes' ez lief he 'd wander ez work. He talks ter me till them tales hender me mighty nigh ez much ez him. No fodder sca'cely would hev been pulled hyar ter-day ef he hed stayed."

The mention of his work reminded him of it anew. As he stood in the turn-row, he began to tear from the stalwart stalks of the Indian corn, tasseled far higher than his head, the long blue-green and glossy blades, rustling at a touch and shining in the sun. He was in his shirt-sleeves, a gaunt, shambling fellow, with yellow beard and hair, and long, tobacco-stained teeth; he had a docile, acquiescent face and a temporizing blue eye. Few men could contrive to agree with both Jepson and Strobe, but to Ben Bowles no miracle of trimming was impossible. The corn was fine; the heavy ears, swathed in their crisp husks and crested with sun-embrowned silk, hung far from the stalks, about which trumpet vines twined, the blossoms flaunting scarlet. There even peered out now and then the tender blue eyes of morning-glories, still open, abloom in the dank shadow. The more prosaic growth of pumpkins was about the roots, and sometimes Bowles caught his awkward feet in the vines, and added a stumble to his shamble.

"The sperit hev been with me strong, — mighty strong, ter-day," said Teck Jepson suddenly. "I hev been studyin' on Moses, from the time he lef' the saidges by the ruver bank," he added, bridling with a sentiment that was strikingly like the pride of earth. Then, as he gazed down at the landscape, his face softened and grew pensive.

The great ranges were slowly empurpled against the pale eastern horizon, delicately blue, for the sun was in the western skies. How splendidly saffron those vast spaces glowed! What purity and richness of tint! Here and

there were pearly wing-like sweeps of an incomparable glister ; and the clouds, ambitious, must needs climb the zenith, with piled and stately mountainous effects, gleaming white, opaque and dazzling. The focal fires of the great orb were unquenched, and still the yellow divergent rays streamed forth ; yet in its heart was suggested that vermilion smouldering of the sunset, and the western hills were waiting.

“ 'T war tur'ble hard on Moses,” said Teck Jepson dreamily, “ when the Lord shut him out'n Canaan, arter travelin' through the wilderness. Tur'ble, tur'ble hard ! ”

There was naught in the scene to suggest to a mind familiar with the facts an Oriental landscape, — naught akin to the hills of Judæa. It was essentially of the New World, essentially of the Great Smoky Mountains. Yet ignorance has its license. It never occurred to Teck Jepson that his Biblical heroes had lived elsewhere. Their history had to him an intimate personal relation, as of the story of an ancestor in the homestead ways and closely familiar. He brooded upon these narrations, instinct with dramatic movement, enriched with poetic color, and localized in his robust imagination, till he could trace Hagar's wild wanderings in the fastnesses ; could show where Jacob slept and piled his altar of stones ; could distinguish the bush, of all others on the “ bald,” that blazed with fire from heaven, when the angel of the Lord stood within it. Somehow, even in their grotesque variation, they lost no dignity in their transmission to the modern conditions of his fancy. Did the facts lack significance because it was along the gullied red clay roads of Piomingo Cove that he saw David, the smiling stripling, running and holding high in his hand the bit of cloth cut from Saul's garments, while the king had slept in a cave at the base of Chilhowee Mountain ? And how was the splendid miracle of translation discredited because Jepson believed that the chariot of the Lord had rested in scarlet and purple clouds upon the towering summit of Thunderhead, that Elijah might thence ascend into heaven ?

He mistook the dramatic instinct, that entranced him with these splendid epics, for religion. He sang loud and long in the meetings, with a rich voice and a fervid indorsement of the sentiment of the rude hymns, but he told few experiences; his soul seemed untroubled, unstirred; he neither shouted nor exhorted others, and in the midst of exhortation he often dropped asleep. But if the text were from the Old Testament, rich in narrative, his fine head was alert, his eyes grew eager and intent; he would lean forward, to lose no word, his hand on the back of the bench in front of him, and often his strong hand trembled. He was an earnest advocate of education. "Let the Bible be read!" he would exclaim in a thunderous, coercive voice, strong with the sincerity of his own wish to read. For he was sometimes aware that he carried with him broken impressions of the stories that emblazoned his mind. Then his quick supplementing fancy would unconsciously assert itself anew, the rift would close, and the continuity would stretch forth perfected.

His was the mind receptive, romantic. The endowment to believe the essential verity, undemonstrable though it be, to see that which is not before the material eye, to feel the abstract sentiment, he shared with those for whom tradition has woven its fine, embellished webs, and history has penned its heroic page, and poets have sung and have soared. The gift was in the nature of a sarcasm, bestowed here. He had not even the cradle lore of other men. Niggard circumstance had environed him with all the limitations of ignorance. In these close bounds, the readings of the circuit rider gave him the only collations of connected fact, the only narrative, the only glimpse of a status of people more amply endowed than those about him; and the dramatic instinct vivified the meagre details, caused them to glow before him, and they served for him as the libraries of the world serve for other men.

Encompassed by the democratic sovereignty that hedges

about an American voter ; knowing no rank, no gradations of caste, other than that of the sheriff, the constable, the justice of the peace, — and latterly the high estate of a circuit judge had been brought to his knowledge, — it was curious how he caught from the spirit of the text the sentiment of awe and reverence for the exalted in the earth, prophets and high-priests, kings and great captains. He exulted in the Scriptural pageantry. His fancy would marshal again and again the fine show of the serried ranks of opposing armies along the mountain side, when David went out in the valley to fight Goliath. The triumph would hardly have been what it was to him without those multiplied martial spectators, — nor, it is safe to say, to David either.

“Yes, sir,” he reiterated. “’T war tur’ble hard on Moses. I jes’ know how he felt. Thar ain’t nuthin’ in this worl’ so tormentin’ ter the sperit ez ter be in a place ye *despise*, an’ hanker an’ hone ter git ter another. Whenst I war a witness in the court yander at Glaston agin Jake Baintree ez killed Sam’l Keale, I fairly pined so fur the mountings my chist felt tight, like I could n’t breathe, an’ my eyeballs plumb started out’n my head. An’ when they ’lowed thar’d hev ter be a new trial, an’ I’d hev ter kem back las’ March agin, I war so outdone an’ aggervated by the foolin’ ’round o’ them lawyers, ez tuk an’ sp’iled the case they hed been at sech trouble ter fix *jes’ so*, that I jes’ up-ed an’ ’lowed afore the jedge ez I hoped I’d be dead afore that time.”

“The folks laffed at ye, too,” said the constable.

“Let ’em laff, — laffin’s cheap,” retorted Jepson. He was one of those happily constituted mortals who respect their own mental attitude far more than its effect on others.

“Waal, they ’low ez Baintree air a-layin’ fur ye ’bout’n that thar testimony ye gin agin him,” observed Strobe.

Jepson received this suggestion in the silence of contempt.

“I never looked ter see Baintree let off from that court,” said Bowles.

"Yes," assented Jepson cheerfully. "The law 'peared ter hev a weak streak in it somehows, an' the lawyers said they could n't prove it on him. An' I 'lowed ter the State's lawyer ez they hed better prove it then with a sentence from Jedge Lynch."

The constable, mindful of his position as an officer of the law, cast a sudden glance upon him of threatening surprise.

"What did the 'torney ginerall say ter that?" he demanded pertinently.

"He say ef he hed sech a tongue ez mine he'd tie it ter his palate, ter keep it still," responded Jepson easily. "But I told him thar warn't no danger, fur ef ennybody fell out with the sayin's o' my tongue, the doin's o' my fist war mighty apt ter make 'em fall in agin. Yes, sir," he proceeded after a pause, "I appealed ter Jedge Lynch." His form of expression was reminiscent of his recent experiences in the courts. "I never got nothin' by it, though. Folks is gittin' so white-livered they be afeard o' thar shadders."

"Waal, now," spoke up the constable, moving back a pace, and feeling at a disadvantage in being constrained to look upward at the horseman, "when the courts hev let a man go, an' can't prove nuthin' on him, I say 't won't do fur folks ter set out an' mebbe hang a man by mistake."

"*Whar's Sam'l Keale?*" Jepson asked the question, and then looked casually across the road and the stream at the great vermilion sun going down behind the long summit line, far, far away, of Walden's Ridge,—how finely outlined, how delicate in hue, against the flushed horizon. The mountains close around loomed sombre, purple, silent, and mysterious, sharers in none of these ethereal graces of color. On the rocky banks of the stream, here and there, felled trees were lying; one protruded far into the water, and was green with moss and dank with ooze. It stirred suddenly, for some water animal had sprung upon it, then splashed again into the current, as Bowles's old dog rushed out of

the cornfield with a shrill, sharp bark of discovery. His master's eyes followed him absently, while with a quivering tail and alert ears he patrolled the banks hither and thither, now and again uttering his sharp cry, varied with wheezes of disappointment.

"*Whar's — Sam'l — Keale?*" Jepson demanded again, significantly, and once more waited for an answer. Neither of the other men spoke. The wind stirred; an acorn dropped with a sharp thud from a chestnut oak; a locust was shrilling from a pawpaw tree. "Ef ye'll tell me ennywhar Sam'l Keale *kin* be, I'll gin it up. Now jes' look-a-hyar," he argued. "Them two fellers — nobody knowed then what they war arter, but it kem out on the trial — got it inter thar heads ez thar war some silver mines in the mountings. An' they sets out ter find one." His lip curled. "So day arter day they leaves thar plows in the furrow, an' goes a-sarchin' fur the silver mine. An' one day nare one o' 'em kems back. A plumb week goes by. An' then hyar kems Baintree nigh starved with a-wanderin' in the woods, an' with a big tale 'bout Sam'l hevin' fell down a hole ez 'peared ter be the mouth o' a cave, an' he could n't hear nuthin' from him, though Baintree hollered an' hollered. An' he war afeard the law'd take arter him, kase they war a-scufflin' whenst Sam'l slipped an' fell. Waal, the folks tuk arter him fur not hevin' kem straight ter tell, — lef' the critter thar in the cave ter starve or drown. None o' that fooled me!"

He broke off abruptly.

Ben Bowles pulled his hay-colored beard with meditative fingers. "Ye b'lieve Sam'l war dead fust, an' then war flung down inter the cave."

Jepson knit his brows fiercely. "Percisely."

"Ye 'low, ef he warn't, Baintree would hev been powerful quick ter skeet out'n them woods an' git somebody ter help him git Sam'l out, 'thout waitin' a week!"

"Jes' so!"

The constable put in suddenly; his loyalty to the law was enlisted, and he felt it his bounden duty to support its decisions with the weight of his personal opinion.

"Baintree 'lowed Sam war dead, or hed sunk spang through the yearth, kase he would n't answer. The boy war *afeard* ter tell. He would n't even tell a-fust ez they war a-scuffin' an' a-playin'. An' ez the jury 'lowed he warn't guilty, I feel ez ef he ought ter be let ter go."

"*Whar's — Sam'l — Keale?*" demanded Jepson once more.

Neither answered. The shrilling of the locust persisted sharply. Only the rim of the sun showed above the distant blue mountain; the soft suffusions of light upon the great valley were reddening, and a sense of impending shadows, not yet falling, was upon the air. Night was pluming her wings, to spread them erelong. A point of light suddenly scintillated in the dark flow of the mountain stream, for the poetic evening star — how serene! — was in the sky. What prophetic melancholy had pierced the group of pines hard by? Their fringes were astir, and a monody, all tenderly subdued and subtly mournful, was on the air.

"Baintree kem down yander ter the blacksmith shop las' Wednesday," Jepson resumed abruptly. "I war thar ter hev this hyar horse-critter's nigh fore-foot shod;" he leaned over, glancing down at it, then came suddenly to the perpendicular. "He kem thar ez ef he expected folks ter 'bide by the verdic' an' be sati'fied. He kem in the door an' walked roun', an' then he sot down in the winder. An' then I jes' riz up. I said ter him, I said aloud, 'Cain, I see Abel with ye. I view him thar. Ye need n't winge away. He hev kem ter abide alongside o' ye. Ye kin hide him in no caves. He air yer share forever!' An' then I turned back ter the anvil, whar Clem Sanders war a-for-gin' of the horse-hoe. An' time he hed bent the bar I looked over my lef' shoulder, an' the winder war empty."



A long pause ensued. "Waal, sir," Strobe presently remarked, "folks 'low he hev got religion now, an' air goin' ter be baptized."

Teck turned a face of amazed anger upon him.

"He sha'n't!" he cried, as arrogantly as if he guarded the gates of heaven. "He shell not save his soul! He shell not reach the golden shore, whilst the man he buried in the depths o' the yearth, 'thout nare minit's grace ter think on salvation, air a-welterin' in brimstun, an' a-burnin' in hell. He shell not save his soul!"

His breath was short, his cheek flushed, his eye intent and fiery. All at once his whole aspect changed.

"Hy're, A'minty!" he cried out, his flexible voice rising to a cheery key. "I see ye; no use a-hidin'. Supper ready?"

For there, sidling along among the weeds in the fence corners, was a small girl, much distraught by the presence of a stranger, and holding her head so bent down that little could be seen of her face for the curling tangled red hair that fell over it. She wore a blue checked homespun frock, and she carried in her arms, feet upward, a large, ungainly yellow cat, with unattractive green eyes, which rolled about while its head hung down.

"They blows the horn at the house fur we-uns," Jepson continued, "but A'minty keeps one eye on the pot, an' kems arter me jes' a leetle aforehand every day. She knows I be afeard ter go ter the house by myself. Suthin' mought ketch me on the road — varmint, or dogs, or sech."

He winked jovially at the two men, but A'minty stood unsmiling by the fence.

Suddenly the resonance of a horn was on the air, with a trailing refrain of echoes. So far they rang, so faint, so fine, they hardly seemed akin to the homely blast wound close at hand. The moon, rising now, — a lucent yellow sphere in the pink haze of the skies, far above the purple earth, — might naturalize such sounds. Thus rings the . . . . .

horn of Diana, perhaps, amidst the lunar mountains. And when the vibrations died away the ear strained to hear them again ; so elfin was the final tone that the succeeding interval was less like silence than a sound which the sense was not fine enough to discern.

“Wanter ride, A’minty?” Teck demanded of his small niece.

Her shyness vanished instantly. She showed a rounded freckled face and shining eyes, and an assemblage of jagged gleeful teeth, as she ran, with the deft noiselessness of the barefooted gentry, almost under his horse’s heels and caught the stirrup. He reached down gravely for the cat, holding it by the middle, with its four stiff paws outstretched, and A’minty clutched his great spurred boot, and climbed up his long leg like a squirrel. He rode off, the rifle stayed upon the pommel of the saddle by the hand that held too the reins, while the little girl, nestling in his arms, looked back at the two men by the side of the fence, and the cat, which she clasped, turned its supple neck and gazed back, too, from its perch above the horseman’s shoulder.

The two men followed them with a languid gaze for a moment ; then Strobe was moved to seat himself slowly and circumspectly on a bowlder near the roadside. As he leaned his shoulder against the pawpaw tree close by, the locust shrilling high up among its branches suddenly ceased its iteration.

“Teck air too durned smart,” he said, his own individuality reasserting itself since freed from the dominant presence of the other, — “too durned smart. Set an’ talk afore a off’cer o’ the law ’bout lynchin’ a man, an’ gin his opinion agin a jury’s verdic’ an’ a jedge’s say-so. He hev got the big-head powerful bad. Axin’, ‘*Whar’s Sam’l Keale? Whar’s — Sam’l — Keale?*’ ez ef enny cit’zen hev got enny right ter know or say, when the law’s done its sheer.”

“I reckon Jake Baintree mus’ be innercent,” observed Bowles, with the mild eye and voice of the temporizer.

"He war twenty when it happened, an' he be twenty-five now — a year older 'n Teck. It tuk all that time ter jail an' try him."

"Waal, the law is slow, — the law is slow." The important constable deported himself with a sort of clumsy pride in the lingering exploits of the law.

"Yes, sir; 'minds me of a slow mule-race all the time, the law does," said Bowles.

Strobe looked at him, surlily suspicious of a satiric intent, but the mild Bowles had evidently spoken in all good faith.

"Sech talk ez Teck's air the reason they hed ter hev a change o' venue," said Strobe, presently. "Stiddier tryin' Baintree in Colb'ry, his county town, they hed ter take him ter Glaston, 'kase folks in this county war all so set agin him the court 'lowed he could n't git a fair trial hyar."

"I reckon his folks hev been powerful put ter it ter live along all this time," remarked Bowles.

"I know they never planted none the fust year," rejoined Strobe.

"Waal, at fust they 'lowed it would be soon over, an' they jes' stirred thar stumps ter do everything fur the trial, an' they thunk o' nuthin' else. Then nex' year they hed ter pay suthin' ter them lawyers, whether they sp'ilt thar case or no."

"Jake war a-tellin' me the t' other day," said Strobe, "how thankful he war ter some o' thar neighbors, ez hed holped 'em along in thar troubles. Ye know he air so meek-spoken, an' perlite, an' sech now; an' he jes' makes hisse'f ez small ez he sets by the fire, an' he grins afore ye kin speak ter him, an' — I dunno." He relinquished suddenly the descriptive effort. "An' I jes' spoke up, an' I say, 'I 'd be obleeged ter ye, Jake, now that the law hev let ye off, ef ye would n't *look* so durned guilty."

"What 'd he say?" demanded Bowles.

"Waal, the critter changed suddint. An' he say, 'I know folks 'low I be guilty, an' it makes me look guilty till I plumb *feel* guilty.'"

The constable's portly form had a burly shadow behind it, as he rose from his seat on the rock, for the moon was well up now, glistening through the needles of the pines, and casting a broad refulgent sheen upon the empty road; the blades of Indian corn gleamed, as they stirred in the breeze. Bowles had unhooked his arms from the fence rail, and the two men took their way together to the little cabin in the notch. The conformation of the great slopes above it was such as to show a neighboring peak standing definite and dark against the evening sky. Adown the wooded steeps the shadows gloomed. The ground fell away from the door in an abrupt descent, and through the uninclosed passage between the two rooms, which constituted the house, could be seen a far-reaching defile of crags and sombre purple ranges in the elusive blue distances. The little cabin, its ridge-pole in a slant against the sky, with its forlorn shanty of a barn, its few bee-gums awry along the rickety rail fence, its scanty scaffolds of tobacco and drying fruit, seemed all the more meagre for the splendid affluence of the scene spread out before it on every side. "I kin see fifty mile an' further in three States," Bowles, its owner, sometime boasted.

"I'd ruther see fewer bushes an' mo' cornfield," his wife as often retorted.

It was with none of the complacency of ownership that she contemplated her share in his possessions. She often satirically commented upon them, with a singular absence of any sense of responsibility for them. Although she maintained absolute sway in the household, she deported herself like an alien.

The interior was alight with a dull red glow, for the cooking of supper was in progress; and while she waited for the baking of the johnny-cake she sat upon the step of the rickety little porch and looked about her with an idle, casual glance, devoid of any consanguinity with the objects upon which it rested. She was some twenty years of age,

perhaps. She had a clear olive complexion, and dark brown hair smoothly drawn away from a broad low forehead. Her eyes were small, dark, and bead-like, and held a laughing twinkle in them. She had a blunt nose, and flexible lips that showed two rows of teeth, large, strong, and white. She was accounted good-looking, and had the neat and orderly appearance common to people of that repute. Her compact and well-rounded figure was tidily bestowed in a blue and white checked cotton dress, and from the "tuckin'-comb" at the back of her head no loose ends of hair escaped. Her husband had esteemed himself singularly fortunate to win such a prize, handicapped as he was in the matrimonial race. He felt himself elderly at thirty-five; he was a widower, poorer than his fellows, and burdened with three children. It was rumored in the Cove that she had married Benjamin Bowles to spite another lover, with whom she had quarreled. It is to be hoped that this unique revenge smote with due force its intended victim, but Mrs. Bowles had times of great depression of spirit, and it may be feared that her chosen retribution had given her a backhanded blow in its recoil.

It was with much urbanity that she received the constable, who was her cousin, and who had chanced to be called up into the mountain on official business, and had stopped to spend the night at his relative's house. She evidently entertained some anxiety that a flattering report of the match she had made, and her content therewith, should go down to the Cove, and for this she exerted her tact. She was smiling and brisk as she served the supper, which was savory enough, for she was a good housewife, bland and kind to her step-children, decorous and deferential to her husband; but her manner to his brother was singularly null, which indication Eli Strobe did not fail to notice. There was antagonism here, and each was strong in a way. "Fight dog, fight bar," said Eli Strobe, chuckling to himself.

It titillated his sense of humor to remember how anxious she had been that Jepson should join his cattle and sheep and household gear to her husband's stock, when his mother had died, and his home in the valley was thus broken up. It had been a provident and profitable arrangement on her part.

"Ef she jes' could hev got the vally o' the stock 'thout the bother an' contrariousness o' hevin' Teck in the house, would n't she hev been happy!" Strobe silently jeered.

They sat around the open door, after the meal was concluded. The high air was chill; the influence of the stern wilds, with the lonely moon upon them, with the silent mists vagrant in the valleys, was vaguely drear, but the red flare of the smouldering fire within was genial to see, and harmonized with the sense of home. A'minty sat upon the doorstep, with the yellow cat in her arms; it was wakeful, eying the moonlight, and now and then the flickering gossamer wing of a cicada's short flight in a few hop vines at one side of the porch. The old dog lay at length and drowsed; but a puppy found an absorbing interest in a toad hopping along the road, and now sat and gazed at him with knitted brows and an intent attitude, and now smote him with a festive paw and treated him to a high callow yap. How the leaves of the oak acorded with the moonlight; how they lent their glossy surface to the sheen! The shadows flecked the road with dusky intervals and interfulgent glit-ter, and the great crag that juttet out a little way down the slope was half in the gloom and half in the light. Mrs. Bowles's needles clicked, as she knitted, and gleamed in the red glow of the fire.

"Miss me enny in the Cove, cousin Eli?" she demanded, flashing her beadlike eyes upon him.

Strobe thrust his hands deep in his pockets, swayed himself far back in his chair, and surveyed her with a sort of burly jocosity.

"Waal, *I ain't missed ye ncne,*" he averred. He looked

steadily at her, as if to watch the effect of this statement, and she, apprehending a jest, returned his gaze expectantly. "I 'lowed ez Peter Bryce war competent ter miss ye about all the missin' ez ye war entitled ter. Ho! ho! I reckon he 'lows ez Bowles air ez lucky ez a wishbone."

And Benjamin Bowles, feeling somehow thrust out of the conversation at his own fireside, so that he could think of nothing to say, made haste to glibly laugh too, to show his triumph in his prize; for Peter Bryce was the rejected suitor.

Mrs. Bowles looked quickly at her husband, as if to supervise the due exhibition of gratulation; then laughed coquettishly, with a great show of teeth. "Oh, nobody expec's *ye* ter take ter jokin'! Ye air so sober-sided, cousin Eli."

She dropped a stitch, and bent forward to catch the light of the flames upon it. She drew back with a sharp cry.

"Who put that thar stick o' ellum wood on the fire ter burn? Who's burnin' ellum?" she exclaimed, pointing at it.

"'T ain't ellum, air it?" Her husband bent over in quick anxiety to see.

"Ellum!" said cousin Eli laconically. "I seen it ez soon ez I kem in."

"It air a sign o' bad luck!" she protested, at once flustered and angry.

"Ellum," said cousin Eli Strobe ruminatively. He leaned forward, with his elbows on his knees, and gazed into the fire with his heavy-lidded eyes. "Ellum," he repeated, his pipe between his set teeth. "They makes coffins out'n ellum, an' that's why they 'low that burnin' it air a sign o' death."

Mrs. Bowles looked at her husband for a moment, aghast.

"Sim mus' hev put it on," said Bowles, weakly seeking to shield himself.

Sim was a small carrot-headed boy, whose sullen, watch-

ful eyes and manner, at once cowed and resentful, intimated some harsh dealings of Fate.

"It don't make no diff'ence ef Sim did," said Teck Jepson.

Mrs. Bowles looked at him angrily, apprehending the defiance, but silently; he returned the gaze with steadfast intentness, and she flung petulantly away.

"Sim air a bad aig," she remarked. "I dunno what ailed that 'oman" — thus she always referred to her predecessor — "ter raise her chil'n ter be so mean an' spiteful. She war a fool, sure!"

"Waal, waal," said the husband and father uneasily, "I reckon she done the bes' she could."

It was all he dared say in defense of the dead, but urgent conscience constrained this. He often thought of her, — far more often, doubtless, than if his second marriage had been a smother fate, — and of the terrible winter that she died, when the mountain was sheathed in ice and impassable; no man could come up or go down, and he was isolated in his sorrow. A ghastly gray day it was when he hollowed out with his own hands a shallow grave in the frozen ground, and laid her in it, with only the three babbling children to stand by. It was in some sort as an offering to her memory that he occasionally admitted to himself that his second marriage was a mistake. Sometimes he tried to look upon it as a sacrifice: the children would have frozen stiff, would have starved, would have run wild, with no woman to look after them, he said to himself. And in this half-hearted matrimonial bargain there was a set-off for Mrs. Bowles's spited lover.

The influence of the burning elm was very perceptible in Mrs. Bowles's manner after that; for a time she was silent and preoccupied, and roused herself only to rebuke the children, unmindful of the story that would go down to the Cove. Sim and A'minty were quick to note the change of mood, and deported themselves with a dodging expect-



tation; but Bob, a boy of four, sat before the fire, now broadly smiling, and now nodding and dozing in his chair. He was plump and ruddy, his big eyes were hazel and bright, and his hair, cropped in a unique manner by perverse shears, heightened the grotesque callowness of his aspect. The dogs walked casually over him; the cats climbed upon him, and made him convenient to reach the bowl of milk on the table; the chickens did not scruple to perch upon the arms of his chair, or even on his knee, or his hand, or his head. The world was not easy to small Bob Bowles, but his was the temperament to make it easier. A good-tempered, docile creature he was, for he had no sensitive sentiments to assuage when the smart to his flesh had ceased.

The talk fell among the men, and presently Teck was recounting his garbled version of the preaching he had heard at the camp-meeting in the Cove. The speed that Jehu made, as he so gallantly drove into Jezreel, had impressed him deeply. "I wisht I knowed edzac'ly how fas' he traveled, an' sech time ez he made," he said wistfully. "Pa'son never read that."

The seeming barbarity of the old chronicles, the poetic justice meted out with so unfaltering a hand, had no morbid effect upon his sensibilities. It was but the fit rounding of the heroic tale. The ghastly details, however, were an aggravation to Mrs. Bowles's darkened mood. "Air *that* in the Bible?" she would cry in dismay. "Waal, sir! I'm glad them folks air gone! I'll be bound they made a heap o' trouble. They hed ter bar up the door, in them days, *I know*. Wuss 'n the boys in the Cove."

She tried to change the theme. She rallied her amiability. She flashed her bead-like eyes at cousin Eli with her old-time coquetry, and her renewed desire that only triumphant accounts might go down to the Cove was manifest in her eager anxiety to put the small household belongings before him in their best light. She seemed nearer akin to

her household effects as she sought to gloss over any imperfection. Her recognition of their deficiencies had hitherto been couched in the form of sneers, to acquaint her husband with the damage "that 'oman" had done to them.

"I dunno what ails that cheer ez ye air settin' in ter creak so, cousin Eli," she observed. "It's plumb strong. 'T ain't goin' ter let ye down." Her reassuring smile showed her strong white teeth. Its suavity was gone before its distention relaxed, as she turned suddenly to her husband. "Did ennybody ever put one e-end o' a coffin inter it?" she asked breathlessly.

Bowles started, with a wild glance about the room, as if to identify the chair that had borne so ghastly a burden. "Laws-a-massy, naw, M'ria! *That* cheer air in the roof-room. What ails ye ter ax sech?"

"Waal," she said hastily, in much perturbation, "the old folks 'low ez sech a cheer will groan an' creak ever arter."

"'T ain't disturbin' me noways, cousin M'ria," said cousin Eli. "I'll die when my time comes." He seemed to make an admission in saying this in a deep bass voice.

"I dunno what ailed me ter take up sech a notion," she observed, with a forced laugh, as she resumed her knitting. After this she succeeded in so steering the conversation as to exclude Jepson and further reminiscences of Jezreel; and she was not sorry when, after sitting for a time in brooding silence, he rose, put his pipe into his pocket, and strolled out upon the porch, then down the path in the light of the midsummer moon.

Somehow it seemed to share the lush splendors of the August, the climax of ripening growths, of fair fruitions, of rank and riotous blossoming. Never before, he thought, had it worn so rich and radiant a guise as it hung above the purple mountains; a gilded bloom rested upon its disk; this fine and delicate efflorescence softened yet did not dim its lustre. Far, far, he followed it amidst the great trees,

draped from their stupendous heights to the ground with the luxuriant cables of the grapevines, the fragrance of the fruit perfuming the air. The laurel was done with blooming, but the dew lurked in its bosky tangles, and sent out a scintillating glimmer. How few the stars were! — few and faint, for the night was the moon's. He paused in a rocky rift in a great gorge, that he might look up to see one afar off, with a dim glitter; and the tracings of a coil that he knew, but not as Scorpio; and in a gap in a Carolina Mountain a planet that was rising. How long ago they were kindled, — these stars! How many eyes had turned to them! The prophets saw them. And as he tended sheep and lay on the hillsides with his flocks, David himself had known these lucent splendors. And Moses, familiar of the high mountains, in whose fastnesses he spoke with the Lord as man with man, — they surely shone upon that hidden place where the great lawgiver lay.

“A powerful strange buryin’,” he meditated, “the Lord himself chief mourner.”

He paused, pondering, with a sort of solemn pride that poor humanity should ever have been thus cherished.

The thought of death in the gaunt gorge, with the looming cliffs on either side and many a black chasm below; with only the starveling shrubs to grow, and the moon to light the stark spaces as of a desert world; with the white mists to hide the familiar valley, and a dark mountain to gloom afar, while the lonely sky bent above, induced a strangely isolated feeling, and the recollection of a certain forlorn fate came ghastly and drear into his mind. It was a long time ago, he said to himself, and men die daily; why should he think, with a numb chill upon him, of Samuel Keale? He glanced upward among the black shadows of the jagged rock, sharply outlined in the moon's light upon the gray sandstone. Suddenly a moving shadow was among them: a wolf, black and grisly, with a lowered tail and a keen

muzzle, stood upon the summit, and looked curiously, with doubtful glittering eyes and a quivering snuffing nostril, at the motionless figure below. The cowardly animal sprang back affrighted, when Jepson stirred. He had drawn a broad-bladed knife, and passed his hand quickly along its keen edge. But until his stentorian halloo roused the sleeping echoes with a thousand weird shouts, the animal showed sign of flight. It crouched like a frightened dog; then turned, and ran cowering and silent along the summit, pausing only once to cast a swift glance backward, and so out of sight.

"Ef ye hed been hongry, Mister Wolf, ye'd hev kem down hyar ter see what I be made out'n. Too many good sheep an' yearlin' cattle pastured round them thar mountings fur ye ter git fightin' hongry till winter-time."

He put up his knife, but his mind was tenacious of its impressions. The wolf had added another grim suggestion to the idea of death alone among the mountains, in the depths of the unexplored, inaccessible cave.

"'T ain't fur from hyar-about, I hearn tell," he said. Then he took himself to task. "I hev got ter quit this hyar way o' lopin' in the woods like I war bereft. I'll git teched in the head, ef I don't mind. Folks are beginnin' ter laff at me, ennyhows, 'bout talkin' so much 'bout them in the Bible. Las' time I war at the Settlemint, them boys thar at the store axed me, 'How 's Solomon, an' Mrs. Solomon?' Durn 'em! I'd hate, though, fur Moses an' David an' them ter kem back, ef they could, an' find me so beset an' tuk up 'bout them an' thar doin's. I'll be bound they wouldn't take ez much notice o' me."

As he sought to assume his place on this basis of mutual indifference, he noted a rock lying before a niche in the cliffs. It had been cleft by some freeze of the past winter perhaps; the fragment had fallen down the chasm at some distance, and he could dimly see the black interior of the

fissure. Once again, the idea of death recurred to his persistent mind. This was like the burial caves of the Bible, with a stone rolled to the door of the crypt. He sat down near at hand; he was trembling with the intensity of his interest. He gazed at the place with an excited fascination. He wondered if any one could have been buried here. But no, — he would have heard of it. Besides, he was surprised now that he could have thought it, — the place was too contracted; a full-grown man could not have been entombed in this niche.

His interest flagged upon the prosaic summons of fact. He rose to turn homeward. Then he stopped suddenly and looked back. In shifting his position he saw the moon full on the place now, on the broken stone that had been rolled to the niche; shining through the rift, blanching the sandstone, and showing distinctly, too, some dark object within.

He did not understand his motive afterward. He fell upon the rock in a sudden fury; it yielded to his strength, and rolled crashing down the gorge, rousing a wild clamor in the silent mountains. He did not hear. He did not heed.

The niche was smaller even than he had thought. There were no ghastly relics, no bones, no hair; only a man's hat and coat, quite fresh and well preserved, — the usual jeans coat, the white wool hat common in the mountains; but as he unrolled them, there was some vague air about them that was familiar, and he knew them for the missing man's. When were they hidden here? His quick imagination could answer, could paint the scene in every minute detail. He saw the skulking, guilty creature coming down the gorge laden with these garments, warm then from the form chilling fast, perhaps, in some icy subterranean current. The niche was a ready hiding-place, the great rock close at hand. And here they had lain concealed till the essential moment when the freeze cleft the rock and rendered up the

evidence, — the new evidence, so long buried where the criminal had hidden it. And as Jepson held the garments aloft a recollection of his experience in the courts came to him. “A man shall not be placed twice in jeopardy of his life for the same offense,” said the lawyer.

## II.

THE undying grandeur of the mountains, their solemn fixity, the mystery that hangs about them, and their sombre silences impose upon the mind a sense of immutability, and in their midst human life seems a fluctuating, trivial thing, and men come and go with the transitory ineffectiveness of a shifting vapor.

Something of this was in Teck Jepson's thoughts, as he stood on the river bank at the baptizing in the valley, and looked about him at the close-circling purple heights. He remembered many who had known them, and whom they would know no more; and he fancied that others — half fact, half figment of his ignorant imagination — had made their homes here, who had never trod these rugged ways. And he took note, too, of the vanishing presence of the Indian and those dim traditional pygmy dwellers in Tennessee, far back in the fabulous perspectives of time, still vaguely known in rural regions as the "little people."

A dusky bloom was upon the vast slopes, for a black cloud overspread their summits and portended rain. All the landscape was in the sullen shadow, and wore this dull purple, or a deep, indefinite gray and brown, save that upon one of the minor ridges about the base of the Great Smoky the sun's rays fell diverging from a rift in the clouds, — a yellow fibrous slant on the illuminated emerald tint of the foliage below, indescribably brilliant in the sudden contrast. The stream, closely begirt on one side by frowning crags and lower rock-bound banks on the other, was black and swift and sinister, with here and there a white flash of foam. It might have suggested Styx rather than Jordan,

but for the congregation standing on the pebbly margin where the county road came down in a cleft in the rocks to a doubtful ford, — the landing being effected on the opposite side, so far up stream that it was barely visible, — and but for the weird baptismal hymns and the echoing psalmody of the heathen rocks.

The assemblage had a melancholy guise: the elder men grizzled and grim, with broad-brimmed hats and clad in jeans, and the women with pallid, ascetic faces, barely glimpsed under their long tunnel-like sunbonnets, and wearing straight-skirted homespun dresses. Only in the rear of the crowd some of the languid young mountaineers showed signs of latent but fitful levity. There were always voices enough to carry on the sonorous hymn, though under its cover remarks in an undertone were often exchanged. Above on the slope were hitched the ox-wagons and saddle-horses that had conveyed the company hither, but in the defile between the crags were two horsemen, still mounted, gravely watching the rite administered.

It was an impressive moment when the old preacher, his white hair and his lined face ghastly in the unnatural light of the day, forged out into the current, leading a young girl by the hand, and crying out in the silence, — for the song had ceased, — “This is the river o’ death! Come down, my sister, and be buried with Christ in baptism.”

A flickering glow of lightning, broad and faint, ran over the clouds, and illumined her pale face and her coils of fair hair, as she was slowly laid backward into the depths of the black water. The next moment she rose, dimly descried in the dun light of the gray day, exclaiming that she had risen from the dead, and crying, “Glory! Glory!” in an ecstatic frenzy, as she struggled, with dripping hair and garments, to the shore.

All the rocks echoed the shrill, rapturous cry, and “Glory! Glory!” sounded far and faint up and down the river.

“On Jordan’s stormy banks I stand!” The chorus was



renewed, its wistful, subdued spirit contrasting with the joyful exclamation, "Glory!" that still pierced its cadences.

Suddenly a sturdy, stout young man with short cropped black hair, a bullet head, and an intent manner, and clad in copper-colored jeans, plunged into the cold water and waded out alone, not waiting to be met by the parson; for when the old man turned about, the candidate was standing in the middle of the river.

"Ye notice how turrible brash Josiah Preen be, — can't wait fur pa'son ter summons him," one of the horsemen in the gorge observed to the other, "but needs ter dash out in the ruver that-a-way, ez ef thar warn't water enough ter go 'roun', an' he'd miss his chance o' gittin' glory."

"He be goin' ter save his soul hisself; he ain't goin' ter wait on the slow arm o' the Lord," commented the other.

"He's ez awk'ard ez a peeg caught in a gate," returned his companion. "I ain't s'prised none ef he gits frustrated, an' drowns in that shallow water."

And indeed there was a vigorous scuffle, as the candidate misunderstood the direction and manner in which the stalwart old clergyman proposed to lower his robust bulk. He was under water longer than the usual interval. It splashed and surged above him, and finally he came up, seemingly in an athletic struggle with the parson, choking and sputtering and meekly submitting to be led to the bank, shuffling and hindered by his heavy water-logged garments.

The congregation solemnly resumed the chant, as if the rite had been administered in its most decorous method; but its mishaps occasioned great though suppressed joy to the young sinners in the rear and to the two men on horseback in the defile.

Most of the candidates were young people, some mere children, for the elders had "got religion" long years ago. The "perfessin' members" looked on at the ceremony with retrospective eyes, wise in experience.

"Ye 'low ye air comin up inter a new land!" cried out

one of the brethren suddenly, expressing, perhaps, the thought of many of the congregation. The exhorting voice had a strange staccato effect in the midst of the chanting, which diminished gradually and quavered into silence, — “inter a new lan’, whar godliness finds a smooth path an’ needs no staff fur its steppin’ out strong, an’ the way is plain, an’ the end in view! Oh, my frien’s, this ain’t Canaan, an’ nuthin’ like it; jes’ old Kildeer County, whar the devil loves ter roam an’ rage. An’ now’s yer chance to show yer heart air changed! Ye’ll find yer besettin’ sins like tares in the groun’, an’ Satan a-waitin’ in the briers ter tempt yer steps. The day is dark, an’ the way — ah! — is long — ah! — an’ no man kin see whar it leads — ah! Oh, be not a cast-away!” His voice rose into song and the docile chorus followed: —

‘Oh, be not a castaway,  
Ye whom Jesus loves.’ ”

A heavily built man of forty was one of the exceptions to the prevalent youthfulness of the candidates. He went down in a hesitant and circumspect manner, and he entered the cold water so slowly as to suggest reluctance.

“He ain’t used ter that thar kind o’ liquor,” one of the unregenerate horsemen observed, in a low tone. He had crossed his right leg over on the pommel of his saddle, and he leaned his elbow on his knee, and rested his chin in his hand as he talked, looking between his horse’s intent ears. “An’ he ain’t got no real interus’ in the lan’ a-flowin’ with milk an’ honey. He’d git mighty happy, now, though, ef somebody ez knowed could make him b’lieve they hed a quiet leetle still hid up in one e-end o’ Canaan.”

“What ailed him ter git religion, ennyhow?” demanded the other, whose horse was restive, bowing down his head and tossing his mane, and from time to time lifting his fore-foot and pawing impatiently.

“His wife died, an’ that reminded him he war mortal hisse’f. His religion ’ll las’ him jes’ ’bout ez long ez he ’members his wife.”

"An' that 'll be till he kin git him another one — ez ain't dead," rejoined his co-cynic.

The candidate assumed a port of religious joy, as he rose with a commotion of the water that reached in concentric circles from bank to bank. A yellow flicker glanced along the dark ripples, for the sharp blades of the lightnings cleft the clouds. The wooded slopes, the crags, the level reaches of the valley, were lifted, with all their tints distinct in this unnatural, dream-like light for a moment, then sank into the dull purple monotony of the overhanging cloud. His bearded face and wild eyes were illumined for the instant, as he came struggling to the shore, hoarsely shouting that he had viewed heaven and was risen from the dead, while the faint, sullen thunder muttered among the mountain-tops.

The next moment a thrill ran through the assemblage other than the fervors of religion, or the natural curiosity elicited by the developments hitherto. A man, for whom the pastor was waiting in the stream, was coming down the bank, — a man with that singular pallor acquired by years of indoor life, and known as "jail bleach;" a tall, thin figure, clad in brown jeans that hung loosely upon him. He had bright, quick, gray eyes, black hair that lay straight and close about a narrow, thin head, and clear-cut, regular features; the profile showed with onyx-like distinctness against the clouds and the dark river, in the lurid light of the day. It was Jake Baintree, the man who had last seen the missing mountaineer, and who had been tried for his murder and acquitted.

The congregation had forgotten to sing. It was in dead silence that he went down to the typical flood to wash his sins away.

Hoof-beats smote suddenly the tense and stormy stillness. The horsemen were riding down the rocky defile to hear what might be said, reining in at the rear of the crowd; one standing erect in his stirrups, to look over the heads

and down into the dark current, the other kneeling on his saddle.

It was not the parson who met Jake Baintree. A figure like Saul's, taller by a head than all his fellows, with a long supple step, an imperious erectness, and a manner that would not be denied, interposed on the bank of the river, laid a hand on the candidate's breast, and held him back.

"Wait, Jacob Baintree!" exclaimed Teck Jepson. "Wait till ye hear how the rocks hev cried out agin ye. They would not hold thar peace, though the jedge an' the juries let thar hands fall, an' jestice dwindled away. An' what did the rocks say?"

He stood alert, tingling in every fibre, his hand still on the man's breast, who had put up both his own hands to pull it down. But there they rested upon it, as if palsied, while he fixed his startled, fascinated gaze upon the fiery eyes of the other.

"The rocks say, 'Sam'l Keale's coat!'" Jepson held up a dark garment, shaking it in the air. A tremor ran through the crowd; a low, inarticulate exclamation burst from it. The candidate's hands fell from the arm he had sought to clutch. He winced perceptibly, and Teck Jepson's grasp closed on his collar. He should hear; they all should heed. "An' then the rocks say, 'Sam'l Keale's hat!'" Jepson held it aloft. "I fund 'em in a hollow, ahint a rock, folks, — a rock ez would n't hide 'em, for the freeze split it, an' revealed the gyarments ter my eye. Now," — he flung the man from him, — "go ter yer baptism in brimstun' an' wrath, whar the worm dieth not, an' the fire is not squenched!"

He turned, and was lost in the crowd, many shrinking away in horror from the garments he held in either hand, and from his furious look and manner. For there was some sympathy for the man whom he left trembling on the bank, and attentive ears, and minds open to conviction, were lent to Baintree's words as he exclaimed, —

"I can't help it, brethren. I dunno what Sam'l done with his old clothes, nor why he hid 'em in a rock. I dunno ef they air Sam'l's, an' Teck Jepson don't nuther. But" — he subtly felt the strength of his argument — "*he* sha'n't hender me! The devil sha'n't hender me! I hev got my religion. 'Oh, grace is mine! I hev got my sheer!'" he sang tremulously.

Somehow the excited people did not join, and he went down into the black water to the music of his own quavering voice.

The parson stood as if petrified in the midst of the stream. The lightning illumined his white hair, and the thunder rolled once more. The clouds were in motion; there was a dank smell of foliage in the air; rain had begun to fall somewhere in the mountains, — a matter ordinarily of interest to an unhoused crowd so far from any shelter or habitation. But they all remained motionless, watching the young man as he waded out to meet the venerable pastor.

Suddenly the parson's figure stirred. He lifted his arms; he was sternly waving the candidate away. "Until ye confess, — until ye confess!" he cried, striding toward the bank, presently lifting his voice into song, mechanically joining the rejected aspirant's refrain, "Oh, grace is mine! I hev got *my* sheer!" unconscious of any satiric meaning the words conveyed.

The crowd took up the chant fragmentarily, amidst the pealings of the thunder and the sharp dartings of the lightning; it was broken, too, by their movement, for as they sang they were turning toward their wagons and horses. The first heavy drops of rain were falling as Jacob Baintree reached the rocky bank, scrambling up its rugged slopes into the very drear scenes of this world as he knew it.

### III.

THE energy of a persecutor for conscience' sake is a robust endowment. Untrammelled by the sense of any personal shortcomings, by doubts, or extenuations, or denials; devoid of compassion or sympathy; insistent, blind, unreasoning, it affords unique opportunity for the display of consistency.

Teck Jepson, as he strode along the red clay road toward the purple slopes, to meet a dun-colored mist rolling down from the black cloud, bore a strong heart within him, and the testimony of a conscience essentially his own. He encountered rebuke, or remonstrance from those trudging on in company by the stalwart declaration, "Ez the Lord bade me, so I did act!" His manner implied a fierce elation, and his tall massive figure, his free strong gait, his erect head, were conspicuous in the midst of his more slouching companions. He flung the sonorous phrase over his shoulder, heedless whether it were answered or how, and often the interlocutor was silenced by this assumption of a subtly delegated authority. But there sometimes ensued excited argument among the portion of the congregation that chanced to go his way. In it he took no part; now and again he lifted his voice in the final chant of the meeting, "Grace is mine; I hev got my sheer!" joining the refrain, as it was sung afar off amongst groups wending northward or southward. Sometimes only a white-covered wagon was visible in the distance on some high slope, rounding a precipitous curve at the verge, and then disappearing in the dense foliage; and again the presence of the dispersing worshipers was merely intimated by the song rising faint

and far from the deep coverts of the mountain, mournfully ringing from crag to crag, and now and then accentuated by a crash of thunder.

Often the comments of his companions assumed the third person, so imperatively did his manner imply the withdrawal of his attention : —

“I say, ‘Ez the Lord bid him’! Shucks! The Lord ain’t studyin’ ’bout Teck Jepson,” declared Joe Bassett, one of the horsemen who had watched the scene from the defile. “The Lord hev fairly furgot the critter war ever created,” he continued, thus arrogating also intimations from above. “An’ hyar’s Teck jes’ a-settin’ back an’ purtendin’ ter be gifted with wisdom from on high!”

He swung his feet in a disparaging manner in and out of his stirrup-irons, and rolled about in the saddle with an air burlesquing exaggerated importance. He was a tall, good-looking fellow, with a bronzed face and “sandy” hair and beard.

But when Parson Donnard rode by, the respect for Teck Jepson’s views was enhanced by the reminder of the pastor’s acquiescence. He cast his excited light gray eye upon Jepson. The young man glanced up, — not with the manner of seeking countenance or needing support; it was with the confident expectation of approval that he said, “Ez the Lord bade me, so I did act.”

“Follow the voice of the Lord, brother,” responded the parson’s deep bass tones, and so he rode on.

He had an ascetic visage, with a hollow temple, a thin hooked nose, a long, firm upper lip that closed with a fixed expression upon the lower, which was equally as thin and straight. He was keen on doctrinal points, and had severely elective theories as to admission through the golden gates. In fact, heaven would be somewhat deserted and sorry as a final resort, if Parson Donnard’s passport were essential. He drove a hard bargain in salvation, and there were those of his flock who feebly sought to resign themselves to dam-

nation, so imminent did it seem under his ministration. He rode a big gray mule, that lifted him high above his people, amongst whom he deftly threaded in and out. His progress was unlike that of the ox-wagons; the burly teams, with their swinging gait to and fro, preëmpted the narrow spaces of the red clay road, and caused the passing pedestrians to betake themselves to the heavily gullied slopes on either side. Numbers of dogs, partakers in all mountain excursions, trotted demurely along under the wagon-beds, or followed close at their masters' heels. More than once a terrible forked blue flash of lightning rent the clouds, with a simultaneous detonation, significant and sinister. Some tree on the heights had been struck, but only the horses were restive. The women sat, unmarking, crowding the wagons; here and there one, young and slender, rode behind her cavalier on horseback. The rain fell in large, heavy drops, then ceased, and the primitive procession wended its way, under the black clouds, toward the great steep. It had gradually scattered, dwindled, and the horsemen were far in advance of the others, when Teck Jepson turned into the ragged little bridle-path that led up the mountain. He could distinguish, as he stood here alone, far along the curves of the road, figures whose guise was in some way familiar to him, and thus to be recognized. They suggested to him pilgrims and strangers journeying through life in forlorn and mournful ways. The mountains towered above. A great bird, buffeted by the rising wind, was fain to drift with it across the black sky. The river's reflection of a flash of lightning, writhing through the valley, betokened the presence of the watercourse among the timber; and suddenly the clouds began visibly to descend, shred by the wind, and here and there slanting into myriads of lines of rain. A hesitating drop fell upon the wide brim of his hat, and then the world was lost in the tumultuous downpour. Naught could be seen but its serried, dun-colored fibres, save when the lightning flashed through,



revealing vague shapes of looming mountain, or rock, or forest. In one of these illuminations, Teck Jepson, walking blindly on, came to a place that he knew. He turned aside, and climbed up a rugged slope toward a great sandstone cliff which jutted out so far that the space beneath must be dry, he thought, while the wind held to its mood. He kept along the sides of the sheer sandstone walls for a time, helping himself by the outspread boughs of the laurel or a pendent vine, till suddenly a great rift in the rock was at hand. He could see the jagged edge of the crag beetling high above; could hear amidst the stormy dash of the rain the slow patter of the drops, falling by twos and threes from the eaves-like ledges. A tall bull-weed, that swung, purple and burly, among the rocks, was dry, and as he turned into the great niche, chill and white and sheltered, he became aware that others had sought the refuge before him. In the depths within a child was standing, and a young girl sat upon a ledge, a great dog beside her, her elbow on her knee, her chin in her hand, her eyes fixed on the surging storm without. His cursory glance made sure only that she was a stranger. He hardly noted her start of surprise, her intent gaze suddenly fixed upon him, her murmured response to his succinct salutation, "Howdy!" He sank down on a bowlder that lay near the entrance, leaning back against the ledge above, his elbow on it, and supporting his head in his hand. He, too, looked out at the rain surging before the entrance, enveloping all the world in its dim and misty veil; the bull-weed swayed; the drops that fell on the edge of the stone flooring, as it were, of the niche rebounded slightly, shimmered with a steely glitter, and fell once more. The roar, the aggregated accentuation of every separate drop, was a distinct sound, easily distinguishable from the swirling frenzy of the wind, or the mutter of the thunder, or the turmoil of the noisy rills summoned into existence by the conformation of the slopes. He was as still as if he were carved in stone; a massive figure, not devoid of a certain

grace, despite the rude garb of jeans, the high boots drawn over his knee, the drooping curves of his broad hat. The girl had not again glanced toward him, but remained motionless, her chin in her hand, her elbow on her knee, absorbed in her own thoughts. The manners of the ancient hound were less reflective. He sat upright on the ledge, looking out at the chill descent of the rain, elusively commingling with the mist, now and again swayed hither and thither by the pervasive gusts; and as he looked he shivered in every limb, and yawned shrilly and loudly. The inarticulate tones reverberated from the roof of the contracted space, and were repeated unmusically from wall to wall. Teck Jepson glanced up at the disaffected animal, who found this detention so dull, as the dog once more yawned to an unprecedented extent, stretching himself to his extremest length, and rasping his long claws on the stones.

“Hush up!” cried Jepson, in momentary inadvertence.

But the old hound, glad of conversation on any terms, wagged his tail good-humoredly, and came down off the ledge to lick the stranger’s hand. The girl’s face bore a shade of displeasure, although she made no sign that she had heard. Jepson’s eyes fell upon her again. He sat gazing at her, a slow surprise kindling in his face. She took no heed, but looked out at the null mists and the monotonous rain with eyes that seemed as if they never could be dimmed by aught on earth, so pensively lustrous, so crystal clear, they were. They had long dark lashes, and were of a rich brown color, a tint that was repeated in her curling hair, and suggested to his homely experience the gloss and tone of a chestnut fresh from the burr. Her hair waved backward with a deep undulation, which he called a “cow-lick,” from a brow smooth and white and broad. She had no color in her cheeks, but her lips were deeply crimson and delicately cut, and there was a fine free line drawn from the lower one, defining the chin and her

slender throat. Her dark blue homespun dress draped a tall, lithe figure, and the full skirt afforded sufficient amplitude for the old dog to ensconce himself upon its folds and lie wheezingly down, looking out once more at the rainfall, and then closing his eyes in a sort of blinking resignation. Before long he nodded, his lips languishing from their habitual position; his expression would have seemed a clever caricature of himself, if it were intentional. Still she supported her chin in her hand, slightly bending forward, her elbow resting on her knee, her foot, in its little low-cut shoe with its leather lacing, on the stone below. And still Jepson gazed.

"I dunno ez I ever seen ye afore," he observed presently.

Her eyes turned slowly, as she gravely surveyed him.

"I hev seen ye, a-many-a-time, — at preacin'," she admitted naively, "at the church-house, and at camp, too."

Her voice was keyed low, and it had a soft and hesitating accent, as if she were solicitous for the impression conveyed.

"Waal, I don't see nuthin' at meetin'," he observed, with prideful piety. "I be all tuk up with the Word."

"I 'm a perfesser," she hastily stipulated, sitting upright and looking animatedly at him. "I hev been perfessin' a right smart time; but — I ain't — leastwise" — she hesitated, — "the sperit ain't never hendered me from seein' some ez air a-goin' on, though I ain't gin over ter lookin' 'bout, nuther."

"Ye ain't hed much pourin' out o' the sperit, then," he remarked ungraciously.

"Mebbe not," she admitted. Then with a sudden thought, "I jes' tell ye, though, thar 'd be a mighty fallin' off in religion ef the saints could n't consort tergether somewhar, an' see one 'nother, an' talk an' laff, arter the preacin' 's over. Heap o' fun goes on at camp, too."

"Them ez enjyes tharse'fs at camp won't 'low 't war sech

ticklin' fun whenst they gits ter blisterin' in hell, I'll be bound," he declared, with pious relish.

She replied uneasily, "Mebbe not." Then she looked off a little drearily into the rain; for he had a coercively convincing manner, and perhaps she was reviewing with gloomy forebodings the fun she had had at camp-meeting.

It was hardly mercy that prompted him to change the subject or any disposition to mitigate the terrors of future retribution as revealed to him. But he was a young man, and his mundane tendencies were none the less strong because unrecognized.

"That thar yer dog?" he asked trivially.

She responded with brightening interest to the more familiar theme.

"Naw," she said; "he's jes' a sorter — a sorter frien' o' mine." She laughed a little, — a fascinating, elusive gleam upon her grave face, like the flitting presence of a sunbeam in a solemn and solitary place.

"Neighbor's dog?" demanded Jepson.

"Naw." Once more the smile rippled across her red lips, showing her even white teeth. "His owner lives toler'ble fur, over ter Chilhowee; but this hyar dog kem a-visitin' along o' him, an' he kem right off'n, an' the dog got purty well treated, till now the dog — comical old critter," she laughed, with her hand on the hound's head — "kems thar ez ef we war expectin' of him, an' sets up by the fire like folks. I never seen the beat!"

There was a sudden gleam in Jepson's eyes; the blue iris had a lighter tint. His lip curled.

"His owner got purty well treated," he said, with perverse and intentional misunderstanding.

"The dog!" She was fluttered in her haste to correct him. "The dog got purty well treated."

"Ef he kem so all-fired often," he observed, "the owner mus' hev kem a-courtin'." Then he looked quickly at her.

She flushed to her temples; her eyes were alight with

anger; she seemed on the verge of an outburst. Checking herself, she said demurely, "*I* never thunk so, for one. His owner air eighty year old."

Teck Jepson had seldom known the twinge of ridicule. He looked away convinced that she was secretly laughing in triumph at his discomfiture because of this adroit turn of the conversation. But when he again glanced at her she had relapsed into her former attitude, her chin in her hand, her foot on the stone, looking out silently and dreamily. Her aspect was little that of a doughty opponent in a war of words, and he took heart of grace.

"That's fust rate fur a perfessin' member," he declared. He did not fail to observe that she winced. "I'll b'lieve that whenst I see that thar frequent vis'tor's white scalp, an' no sooner."

For a moment it seemed as if she might laugh again. Then she turned upon him with genuine anger, not less serious that it was sudden:—

"I ain't able ter see what gin ye a call ter meddle in it. The frequent vis'tor ain't wantin' ter be baptized, an' ain't a-ondertakin' ter go ter heaven along o' you-uns or enny other survigrous saint. Ef he kin git the folks he wants ter 'sociate with in this worl', the Lord 'll hev ter poke him up with a mighty sharp stick ter make him keer ennythin' 'bout the nex' worl'. That's the state o' the frequent vis'tor. Whenst I see ye kemin' in this place, whar me an' my little sister, Is'bel, hed got fust ter keep dry, I'd hev made ye stan outside, ef I'd know'd ye hed no mo' manners than ter ax me who kems a-courtin' an' who don't. I 'lowed, though, from the way ye cavorted down yander ter the baptizin', ez ye war powerful perlite an' pious, bein' sech a Christian, an' yer mind war n't set on courtin'. Talk-in' 'bout courtin' ter folks ye never see afore!"

"I'll be bound I know jes' who ye air,—yer dad an' all yer folks," he declared, in hasty self-justification. "Tain't ez ef ye'd met up with a stranger,—somebody

from North Ca'liny, or the Lord knows whar. I mus' hev seen ye agin an' agin, 'ceptin' I jes' don't take much notice o' young folks," he added, in a staid, middle-aged manner. "Is'bel," — he leaned forward and addressed the child, a tousled headed, barefooted, wiry little lass of ten or twelve, who had been listening silently and staring at him, — "what's yer dad's name?"

"Eli Strobe," piped out Isabel.

"Thar, now!" he exclaimed triumphantly. "Eli Strobe's cousin married my half-brother, an' I hev got ez much right ter talk 'bout courtin' ez enny frequent vis'tor."

This conclusive logic seemed to daunt the girl. She offered no further reproof, and there was a sort of diffidence in her defeated mien, — the more as he continued: "I be mighty keerless o' who air in this worl'; my interus' air in them ez hev gone afore. 'Pears ter me thar ain't none lef' like 'em — none like Samson, an' Daniel, an G'liath."

A vague solemnity dawned upon her face, at the mention of these names. She sat listening in brooding silence, her crystal-clear eyes on his face as he talked.

"I wisht I hed lived in them days, herdin' sheep, or suth-in'," he added.

"Ye'd be dead now," she remonstrated.

"Air ye one o' them ez cling ter this mortal life?" he demanded, in rebuke. "It's jes' a span, a breath, a mist fur the wind ter scatter."

"Waal, it be powerful comfort'ble whilst it lasts," she argued.

He glanced at her and shook his head, and then relapsed into silence. The continuous rain was now glimpsed through the mist, and again sounded dully from out the invisibilities of the vapors. Its monody accented the increasing chill of the air. A broad flicker of lightning, diffused through all the fine gray lines, showed the distant looming mountains and cliffs without, and illumined her pensive face.

"Yes, sir," he declared, shifting his position, his stalwart

figure tense and alert, "none like 'em now. I could n't . . . . help thinkin', whenst I war a witness in the court down yander in Glaston, what pore shakes that thar jedge war compared ter Sol'mon. Sol'mon, now, would hev put . . . . Jake Baintree through, — he'd hev fund out a way ter fix his guilt on the sinner. 'Member the time," he cried vivaciously, "Sol'mon hed ter jedge 'twixt them two wimmin ez claimed one baby?"

She nodded doubtfully. The event was not to her in the nature of a reminiscence.

"Lord!" he exclaimed excitedly. "I war afeard fur about three minits ez that thar leetle critter would git cut in half! I never war so all-fired skeered."

He fell into silence, revolving in his mind the animation of the scene, — the splendid hall in which the kingly judge pronounced sentence, the crowds of soldiers and priests, the tumult of applause at this vindication of his wisdom, this brilliant exploit of his administrative genius.

How the spectacle allured the mountaineer! How vacant the modern voids!

Once more he stirred and sighed.

"Yer dad's runnin' agin fur constable," he said, a trifle wistfully; to such interests, forsooth, he must turn.

There came a shade of anxiety into her face.

"Yes, sir," she replied, the title a tribute to his arrogations of seniority and to his piety, of a strange quality though she felt it to be. She took one of the ears of the old hound in her fingers and pleated it, as she looked consciously away. The sleeping dog, vaguely discommoded, now and again lifted his head with a vigorous shake, and then dropped it.

The face of Isabel suddenly seemed less youthful. It too bore that anxiety so troublous and pathetic in women and children when they can only suffer, and cannot help. "They think Eli ain't goin' ter be 'lected agin," he said sagely to himself. "Suthin's bruk."

“Waal, Eli’s a mighty good man,” he observed aloud, his kindlier impulses uppermost. “He’s apt ter do his best, an’ that’s all the fur we kin go in this life. He stayed up on the mounting along o’ we-uns one night, not long ago, an’ he bruk the lonesomeness astonishin’.”

The face of the elder sister was suddenly irradiated ; a triumph was in her eyes all tenderly shining.

“Dad air a mos’ survigroun talker, sure,” she assented warmly. “Dad air powerful good comp’ny. ’T ain’t often dad ain’t got suthin’ ter say. I tell ye, it air wuth while ter stop an’ cock yer ears, whenst dad begins ter talk. Dad air ekal ter enny pa’son, ef the truth war knowed, ain’t he, Is’bel?”

Isabel seemed almost profane in the eager precipitancy of her assent. But it was only “Laws-a-massy, yes!” that she said with so emphatic an accent. The child’s face had flushed beneath its freckles. She sat upright, bending steadily on Jepson her concentrated gaze, its intensity redoubled in effect by the very close juxtaposition of her small, piercing dark eyes.

“That’s a fac’.” Teck joined the laudations, their ebullition of enthusiasm proving infectious. “Eli’s a smart man, an’ a good man, too.”

“So good ter us chillen!” cried the elder girl, her eyes alight, — “me an’ Is’bel ; ain’t he, Is’bel?”

“Laws-a-massy, yes!” Isabel once more seemed to swiftly take her oath upon it.

“Why, ef ennything goes wrong thar at home, — the cow gits inter the corn, or the gate swags off’n the henges, — an’ dad gits ter ragin’ ’bout’n it, they hev jes’ got ter say, ‘’T was Is’bel an’ Marcelly lef’ the bars down,’ or ‘The gals war a-swingin’ on the gate.’ An’ like ez not we hed n’t been a-nigh thar. An’ dad, he jes’ cools down ez quick. ‘’T war them leetle darters, war it? Waal,’” imitating Strobe’s slow bovine glance, “‘t ain’t goin’ ter ’sturb *me* !’ But ef it hed been ennybody else, though!” The elder



sister shook her head in a way that promised amplest retribution, and laughed again.

"Yer name 's Marcellly, air it?" Teck Jepson said ponderingly.

"Done fund that out, hev ye?" she exclaimed. Then, with a swift transition back to the paternal perfections, she continued, "Dad 's a tremenjious scholar, — kin read an' write s'prisin'. Dad 's been ter school, I tell ye, an' what he larnt thar warn't how ter ketch grasshoppers. Dad 's the bes' shot in Brumsaidge Cove. Nobody kin shoot agin dad, though, bein' constable," — her voice fell with the sedateness of her logic, — "he ain't gin over ter shootin'-matches, like he war. An' dad kin arrest *ennybody*," she declared sweepingly, "bein' constable. The sher'ff ain't got no mo' power over folks, sca'cely."

"An' dad 'lows the sher'ff be made out'n dough, besides," said Isabel suddenly. "Dad say a biscuit hev got ez much backbone ez that thar sher'ff."

Her sister flashed a warning glance at her. Then Marcella's own bright face fell. "I reckon that's one reason he hev got a better chance o' bein' 'lected agin than dad hev. Some folks 'low ez dad hev set too much store by the law," she observed, lowering her voice, and allured into a confidential mood by Jepson's apparent appreciation of "dad." "Some say ez dad hev whetted the law's scythe powerful sharp, whilst his own hev been lef' ter rust. He hev been mo' tuk up with seein' arter the law, than gittin' 'lected agin, an' — an' " — she hesitated — "folks air agin him, an' bound ter git him beat."

Isabel fixed an eager electioneering gaze on Jepson's face. "Do you-uns vote down in Brumsaidge?" she interrogated him.

"I kin vote fur him — ef I wants ter," he said, a trifle waggishly. "But I ain't a-goin' ter let ye buy my vote, so ye need n't try."

"I dunno ez I be a-tradin'," said Isabel shortly.

"Is'bel, hush up!" exclaimed the repressive elder sister, glancing apprehensively at Jepson to note the effect of the child's curt speech.

But as he lounged upon the ledges of the rock, his head supported on his hand, he was looking with languid good-humor at Isabel, and had evidently taken no offense.

"Dad say it be powerful aggervatin' ter run fur office," resumed Marcella. "He say he don't mind sarvin' the people,—that's mighty easy, fur the law be laid down plain, an' he sets a heap o' store by the law; but it's a powerful differ ter please this man an' not git that one set catawampus, an' mos' of 'em air goin' ter be middlin' mad, no matter what he does or don't do. An' he say sometimes he feels, whenst he be axin' 'em ter vote fur him, like flyin' roun' an' kickin' 'em all right an' lef', an' goin' home fur good."

"Waal, I ain't never seen no candidate fur office do sech ez that yit, an' I'd be powerful glad ef I war 'lowed ter live till I did see it," he retorted, the sensibilities of the suffrage with which he was endowed becoming roused at the suggestion.

She looked at him a trifle deprecatingly; then, with that daring impulse which often furnishes a false step with stumbling sequelæ, she pursued the subject: "Granny 'lows it fairly sets her teeth on aidge ter hear me a-honin' an' a-moanin' 'bout the 'lection, an' dad's chances, an' voters, an' the office, an' sech. An' she say 't ain't nowise perlite an' sensible for wimmin-folks ter spen' thar time in sech ez they ain't got no business in. I can't help dad nor hender. But I jes' feel like ez ef I could take a rifle an' stan' at the polls, an' shoot down them ez don't vote fur dad!" Her eyes flashed, albeit she looked half laughing at him. "'T other night thar war a man at our house ez don't b'long somehows ter dad's party."

"Which party?" demanded Jepson, smiling.

"Dunno. Dad's. An' this man, he said: 'I be powerful sorry I can't vote fur ye, Eli, kase ye air on the t' other

side.' An' dad he say, ez slow an' onconsarned, 'Don't vote fur me, ef ye'd ruther not. It ain't goin' ter kill me ter git beat.' An' I jes' spoke up, an' I say, 'Naw, it air goin' ter *kill me!*' "

"Ye look toler'ble live yit," commented Teck Jepson.

"Granny 'lowed she war so 'shamed o' me, she could hev made soup out'n me, or minch meat, ez onconsarned ez ef I'd been a Shanghai."

"What did Eli say?"

"Oh, nuthin'. Dad 'lows ez everything I do air right an' jes' so — me an' Is'bel, don't he, Is'bel?"

"Laws-a-massy, yes," Isabel affirmed, without hesitation.

The rain was gradually subsiding. One could see beyond the jagged roof of the niche, far across the valley, the gray lines sparsely falling with a free motion and an effect of vast lengths, reaching as they did to the zenith. The dreary mists were gathering themselves together to coalesce in some uncomprehended symmetry of vaporous form, and in silent march were betaking themselves thence with reluctant and exiled mien. Dissimilar, as of a different texture and an alien origin, was the vague gray haze, hardly discernible, rising from the dank earth, and suspended only a few feet above. Suddenly the sun smote it, and how it glistened, now amethystine, now pearly, now a gilded gauze! The wooded mountain-side was splendidly green again, attesting that the rich, ripe August was still straying along the slopes. A sense of renewal, revivification, was in the silver-shotted misty intervals. The moist leaves, glossy and emerald, stirred in the air. Every blade of grass about the portal of the grotto wore globular gauds, as the raindrops caught the light where they swung. A quail called and called down the wet, briery tangles, — sweet vibrant tones! And all at once, that splendid apotheosis of color, that supreme triumph of light, the rainbow, was set in the clouds. How far it reached, — how far! — from sombre Chilhowee to the Great Smoky Mountains, — and the vast

landscape beneath was spanned by the glowing arch. And now it was dimmed, as the light fluctuated, and again it glowed in pristine brilliancy and softness; for albeit the rain still fell, the sun shone.

Teck Jepson watched the change with meditative eyes. The old dog took note of it, too, yawning with an expansive expression, and coming down off the ledges, dragging one slow foot after the other. He sat down on the wet grass, heedless of the drops that fell upon him, and gazed gravely about as if he appreciated the scenery.

"Look at old Watch, now," commented Isabel. "Arter takin' so much trouble ter keep hisself dry an' out'n the storm, he air goin' ter git ez wet ez ef he hed been in the thick of it. Ain't that jes' percisely like a dog!"

"Waal, Watch ain't got no call ter be like nuthin' else." Marcella spoke absently, hardly heeding what she said, only mechanically defending her canine friend. She was leaning back amongst the vines that hung down dry and even a trifle dusty within the rift, and trembled above her head and rested on her shoulder. Her eyes seemed to share the pensive brilliance of the hour, so full of a dreaming light, so softly shadowed by the melancholy droop of the long lashes, they were, as she looked, unseeing, into the illuminated sun set, through the soft falling of the glittering rain. The spirited pose of her delicate head on its slender throat was hardly less marked, in this moment of languor, than when held alert and upright. All her lithe and slender figure was relaxed, as she leaned back in the bower that the vines wove for her, and toyed with a tendril in her hand.

Jepson gazed long and silently at her, as she sat there, wondering again that he should never before have seen her. He felt now as if they had often met, and he became sensible of the repetitious impression in a sort of doubting amazement. Her characteristics he seemed to have long ago conned. He was prepared for every turn of her alert head, every sudden uplifting of her definite arrogant eyebrows

above those soft eyes. He even felt a fostering familiar regard for the wish nearest her heart, and in the fullness of a warm partisan impulse he abruptly spoke: —

“I’ll tell ye right now what’s doin’ Eli mo’ harm with the voters o’ the deestric’ ’n ennythin’ else. It’s this hyar everlastin’ upholdin’ o’ Jake Baintree.”

“It’s the law’s upholdin’ Jake Baintree!” said Marcella quickly.

The dream-light had fled from her face; she looked at him with a shifting spark deep in her clear eyes, betokening a disquieted spirit and a touch of anger.

He changed his attitude, and glanced out over the landscape. “I never expect ter spend my time argufyin’ with enny gal-folks,” he said in an offhand way, and with a laughing sneer. “But ye kin set it down, ef ye air minded ter. Yer dad’s cavortin’ roun’ an’ upholdin’ Jake Baintree, kase this leetle old yearthly jedge down yander did n’t hev sense enough or law enough ter fix his sin on him, air a-goin’ ter defeat Eli, — besides all else folks hev got agin him. Ye mark my words.”

“Waal, I dunno but they hed ez soon take the jedge’s say-so ez yourn.”

She resembled her father, when she gave herself to argument; the slow, calculating glance that she bent upon Jepson, as she turned her head, was singularly like the look she sometimes mimicked.

“I ain’t a-settin’ up my say-so agin the jedge’s,” he responded, quickly. “It’s the fac’s. He can’t git around ’em. An’ Eli can’t git around ’em. An’ the folks in the deestric’ can’t git around ’em. The storm will burst some day, though. The Lord will repay.”

There was an anxious flush on her usually pale face. Her eyes were bright and restless. The irritation of not being able to reconcile her father’s opinions with the prospect of success was smouldering in her manner, and suddenly flamed out in words.

"From all I hev seen, ye air likely ter take the Lord's jobs off'n his hands. He need n't bother 'bout repayin' nobody in Brunsaidge, whar sech a headin' man ez ye air be a-loose. Ye'll repay. Ye would n't let Jake Baintree git baptized, kase ye 'low he killed a man ez the jury say he did n't kill, an' kase ye fund somebody's old clothes hid some-whar. Mebbe he'll never git ter the baptizin' p'int agin. He can't get the sperit whenst he wants it; he can't whistle it back like a dog that follows him."

"Ef he ever hed the sperit no man kin harm him. Did he gin Sam'l Keale time ter think on salvation? Ez the Lord bade me, so I did act," he protested.

She relapsed into silence.

"Jake Baintree be plumb cur'ous," said Isabel, knitting her brows, and laughing, — a constrained demonstration that had no mirth in it. She had wearied of the discussion, which she scarcely understood, and resorted with a freshened zest to gossip.

"How be he cur'ous?" demanded Jepson.

"Waal," said Isabel, twisting the corner of her apron in and out of her fingers, "he *looks* cur'ous. An' he sets an' stare-gazes an' stare-gazes the fire. An' he kin read an' write. He larnt in jail. An' his folks dunno what ter make o' him, nohow. He don't talk none, sca'cely. They 'low he war jes' a boy whenst he went away, an' now he be a plumb differ, ez ef he war somebody else. Mebbe he air somebody else." Isabel paused, with a contortion of the countenance, showing all her jagged teeth, as if she sought to express in some facial way the extreme curiousness of Jake Baintree.

"How do ye know so much about him?" demanded Jepson, surprised.

"Marcelly, she useter go thar a heap, an' I jes' up an' go with Marcelly. Marcelly, she useter tote 'em things, whenst they war so powerful pore an' tormented how ter git along, — roastin'-ears an' 'taters, — and holped 'em weave some. She war holpin' 'em weave whenst he kem home."

A sudden repulsion seized Teck Jepson. "*He ain't the frequent vis'tor?*" he exclaimed.

Marcella drew back, with an abrupt cry. "*Jake Bain-tree!*" she said in horror.

There was a moment of embarrassment. He had his regrets that he had spoken, and she had hers that she had answered. With a woman's tact, she would have passed it by. But he made a blundering, clumsy attempt to better the situation, and asked, with a feint of mirth, "*Who be that thar frequent vis'tor, ennyhows?*"

"*Ye kin hev that fur a riddle,*" she said, with a chilly accent. She glanced loftily past him, as she rose. "*Kem 'long, Is'bel; it's quit rainin', an' we hed better be a-startin'.*"

She stood for a moment, tall, fair, erect, under the rugged arch, which was massively imposed upon the clearing sky. A red suffusion of light was over the valley. The mountains were darkling and purple. An inexpressible sense of freshness blended with the eventide languors. All the woods were vibrant with the ceaseless chirr of the cicada, and the antiphonal chanting of frogs rose and fell by the water-side. Pensiveness pervaded the hour, and melancholy. Far-away cattle, homeward bound, were lowing and clanking their mellow bells. And the misty air ministered to the sun's splendors, and bore its elongated rays far into space in gorgeous amplifications. The ground was dank, and Isabel's bare feet pattered along with a noisy sound, and she was beset with forebodings.

"*I'll be bound the foot-bredg'e over the ruver air nigh under water by this time, an' I ain't one o' the swimmin' kind,*" Isabel observed with callow pertness. "*I war n't raised ter be a frawg.*"

Jepson had hesitated behind the two girls. Isabel's words seemed to suggest his opportunity. "*I mought ez well g'long home with you-uns ez no,*" he remarked. "*'T ain't out'n my way none ter the Settlemint, an' I'll holp ye over the log.*"

They trudged along silently through the forest, with its ceaseless pulsations of sound : Isabel in the van, the other two walking side by side, and the dog of the "frequent visitor" following. Sometimes the shadows fell on Marcella's fair face, sometimes the roseate glow of the west ; and Jepson found a fascination undreamed of before in noting their fluctuations. Her expression betokened little favor toward him, — less, perhaps, than he realized. He had never sought the approval of others, and disapproval he was not quick to discern, since he had no self-disparagement to keep his fears alert.

Long before they reached the river they heard the water roaring, but the unhewn log that served as foot-bridge, thrown from bank to bank, was not yet submerged, and the two girls walked swiftly and lightly across, with no need of assistance. Suddenly the woods gave way, and Broom-sedge Cove lay before them, vague in the closing dusk. Half a dozen log cabins were scattered at long intervals, — for this was "the Settlemint," — their red lights growing distinct since the day had so waned. The sky was crimson above, and seemed to touch the gaunt, black, towering mountains that circled close about the sequestered nook. A star was gleaming near the horizon. Voices rose fitfully and fell to silence, and all was mute save for the nocturnal song of the woods, and presently a few strokes of an axe at some wood-pile, that set the echoes all a-hewing.

They paused beside a rail fence inclosing one of the cabins, where the flare of firelight flickered out into the passage between the two rooms. Marcella's face had become only a vague suggestion, white in the closing dusk, as they stood together a moment at the gate. For she had spoken at last, offering the customary invitation to come in and stay to supper.

"I mus' be a-travelin' up the mounting," he drawled in response. Then he hesitated. "This air the fust time I ever seen ye, but I reckon 't won't be the las'."



He strode off then, and she watched him as he went with his assured gait and singularly erect pose. A deft, swift step he had, too, and she was presently gazing into the closing obscurity where he had disappeared.

“I’d jes’ ez lief ’t would be the las’,” she said to herself, — “I’d jes’ ez lief.”

#### IV.

LOCKED in the stony grasp of the mountains was Broomsedge Cove. Rugged with sudden deep depressions and abrupt declivities, heavily wooded here and anon broken by crags and defying cultivation, this limited basin was all unlike the neighboring coves, those fair nooks of the ranges, fertile and smiling, and level as a floor. The road, dry in summer, was the bed of a stream in winter, and the denizens of Broomsedge then cared little to rove abroad. Certain stretches of abandoned land, once cultivated, had given the place its name, and down their slopes flourished the graceless broomsedge, — pest, poverty-bitten, blight. It seemed to seek the manner of the worthier growths, to bear itself like wheat, or rye, or oats; it wore the semblance of a crop, as it shared with them the bounty of the sun and the benediction of the rain. It waved in the wind, half defiant, half forlorn. Wherever it encroached upon the fields, the grace of utility and the guerdon of labor were gone, and this flout of nature, this perversity of herbage, prospered unwelcome in their stead. But Broomsedge Cove could still boast a considerable acreage of grain, fair and thrifty enough, the unripe green tint contrasting with the red-brown tones of the sedge.

By daylight the Settlement was hardly so apparent to the casual eye as at night, when each red light was the exponent of a fireside. The houses, some of them a quarter of a mile apart, nestling amidst their orchards, were quite invisible while the foliage lasted. The inequalities of the ground further masked the extent of the hamlet; occasionally a blue curl of smoke from beyond a jagged hill gave the only intimation that its further slopes were preempted

as a home. The blacksmith's shop was on the extreme outskirts, beyond the fields and the abandoned spaces where the broomsedge grew. The massive wooded mountain rose close behind it; the gorge narrowed just beyond it, and between the cliffs a stream, with a swift arrowy motion, and now and then a white flash, shot down the steeps. The smith made it useful in his simple art, and its song was a solace to his idle hours. But this was not the only chant flung forth upon the air. Loud and long were the sounds of revelry often issuing from the forge, and in a diminuendo reaching even the ears of the far-away neighbors, who thanked their stars that they were no nearer. The elders, constrained alike by dignity and religion, were wont to shake their heads, and sourly marvel what could be going on at the forge; and the younger men frequently found themselves obliged to go over at once and investigate. The forge was the resort of certain hilarious spirits, among whom the smith himself was chief. Concerning these roisterers grim reports were bruited abroad. It was averred that a greasy pack of "playin'-kyerds" was cherished there, and that a "streak o' luck" seemed to be more desired than light on salvation. A jug of a portly grace had been descried, one day, lurking behind the elevated hearth of the forge, — quite empty, it is true, but an aroma lingered about its corn-cob stopper that was fresh and strong and unmistakable. They often sang; the blacksmith's burly bass voice could be heard with the supplementing echoes over many a furlong of his native wilds. They pitched horse-shoes in lieu of "quates," and wrestled and measured their strength in many good-humored combats. When the great barn-like doors were open and the forge fire flickered out into the night, the place under the overhanging ledge of the mountain was like the mouth of some vast cavern. To those chancing to look in from the glooms without, while the white light fell here and there in a brilliant gleam upon the faces within, and anon fluctuated, and then sank to

a red glow, and so to darkness, the hearty mortal fellows at their turbulent sports were vaguely unfamiliar, and as uncanny as goblins, or gnomes, or troglodytes. And the Settlement seemed wise in wishing them no nearer.

It was a weird and isolated place, and with these impressions astir about it, there was little wonder that a wilder fantasy should presently gain a circulation.

Teck Jepson heard it for the first time one momentous August day. As he rode slowly along the circuitous ways of Broomsedge Cove he was conscious that he surveyed the scene with an interest which it had never before elicited. The porch of Eli Strobe's cabin was vacant, but as he dismounted from his horse, and hitched him to the rack beside the door of the blacksmith's shop, he glanced from time to time across the fields at the house. The hop and gourd vines hung motionless about it, for no wind stirred. Through their screen his sharp eyes descried a spinning-wheel — idle and motionless. No face at the tiny window, no flutter of a blue dress among the poultry in the doorway. The place might have seemed deserted save for the tendril of smoke slowly curling out of the clay and stick chimney, and the dog of the "frequent visitor," standing in the door, wagging his tail, which he had a call to do, Teck remembered, being "purty well treated." He momentarily canvassed the dwellers on and about Chilhowee with a vague desire to identify the owner, but the dog in no respect resembled his master, and Teck's musings were vain. Then he turned away, and sat down upon a log beside the blacksmith's shop, and silently gazed at the blue mountains, against which, in an oblique line, the roof of Strobe's cabin was drawn.

There were half a dozen men lounging about the forge, for it was seldom that Clem Sanders was alone ; and besides his special cronies, the mountain gossips were wont to congregate here. The forge was silent ; the smith himself was leaning against the anvil, his brawny arms folded across his

chest, his pipe between his teeth, his languid eyes fixed on the majestic mountains without, dome on dome and range on range, stretching far away into the distance; while below, the sunlit valley smiled, with only the shadow of a flying bird or an uncertain mist, vague and vagrant, to mar the sheen. He was a tall, bluff fellow, with reddish brown hair, straight dark eyebrows, and a broad low forehead. He had many wrinkles in the corners of his eyes; not from age, for he was only some twenty-four or five, but from persistent twinkling. They were brown eyes and bright ones, not large, but long and narrow. He had a square face and a flexible mouth with merry curves, the better revealed since he wore no beard. His checked homespun shirt was open at his throat; the sleeve was rolled up, showing his great hammer-arm; its muscles were a source of perpetual pride to its possessor.

He took little part in the conversation, the twinkling wrinkles about his eyes expressing his interest when it waxed facetious. Eli Strobe was leaning back against the door in a rickety chair; two men who were sitting on the log moved slightly, to give Jepson more room. A tall, slim, jeans-clad young mountaineer, booted to the knee and accoutred with shot-pouch and powder-horn, and having long light hair showing a tendency to tousled ringlets, lay at length on the grass outside of the door.

"Howdy," said Jepson, succinctly and comprehensively, to the group. Then suddenly addressing the two men on the log, "I seen ye two bucks thar on yer hoss-critters, at the baptizin'. Ye hain't got no right ter mighty nigh ride down the saints that-a-way, 'mongst the congregation, an' ef I hed noticed in time I'd hev made ye 'light an' hitch."

There was a momentary hesitation. Then one of them, Gideon Dake, a languid, lank, loose-jointed fellow, observed, with as little animation as if he were an automaton, "Oh, shet up, Teck! Ye air too robustious. Ye 'low ter fairly rule the Cove!"

The other, Joe Bassett, spoke more briskly. "I ain't afeard ter be a sorter sinner, now, Teck. The devil's got his hands so full a-lookin' arter Clem Sanders hyar ez he ain't goin' ter stop jes' fur me. Hev ye hearn ez he war viewed right hyar in the forge?"

"Shucks!" said Jepson, incredulously. Then leaning forward to look at the burly blacksmith within the shop, "That ain't a true word, air it, Clem?"

"Dunno," said the blacksmith cavalierly. "Let them say ez seen him."

"Ef I do ride down the saints, I ain't never hed Satan ter kem a-bulgin' ter the Settlemint ter look arter me," protested Bassett.

Jepson glanced about him doubtfully. "Who say they seen him?"

"Old Pa'son Donnard," said Bassett, beginning to narrate the old story to a new listener with a relish proportionate to the rarity of the opportunity. "Old man war comin' from Piomingo Cove, whar he hed hed preachin' the day before. 'T war toler'ble late. Thar war n't no moon, an' the dark, it overtuk him. Waal, sir, he kem nigh hyar along o' the water-side. An' he say all of a suddint he seen this blacksmith shop like a yawnin' mouth o' hell, ez ef the mounting hed opened. An' the flames o' the forge fire, they le'pt up, an' sunk down, an' flared out, kase Clem, he'd let one o' them fool boys caper with the bellows. An' pa'son, he see two o' them boys a-wrastlin' in that unholy light; an' Jim Crane war a-dancin' an' a-shufflin', an' a-cuttin' the pidgeon-wing; an' Buck Blake war a-playin' a reg'lar dancin'-chune on the fiddle; an' Clem hyar an' Mose Hull war a-playin' kyerds, an' a-bettin'. Clem war a-settin' on the shoein' stool, an' Mose on a plow, an' they laid thar kyerds on the top o' a bar'l. An' Clem war a-beatin' Mose. An' wunst in a while he'd fling back his head an' holler, bein' so glad! An' suddint Pa'son Donnard say his eyes war opened. He seen settin' in the midst, propped

up on the anvil, Satan hisself. He hed horns, an' he hed wings, suthin' like a bat's, looked sorter bat-wise, only big ez a man. An' Pa'son Donnard say he knowed 't war Satan even before he tuk notice o' his feèt, — one war a huff, an' the t'other war a club-foot! An' he hed 'em both propped up on the stump what the anvil sets on. An' the devil war a-lookin' over Clem's shoulder at sech kyerds ez Clem held. An' when Clem would beat, Satan would jes' hug hisself, an' rock back'ards an' for'ards, an' laff till his teeth flashed fire. An' sometimes Satan would lean over and mighty nigh p'int out ter Clem which kyerd ter play. An' pa'son say his eyes war opened agin."

"'Pears ter me they war stretched toler'ble wide a-fust," grumbled Clem. Although this graphic detail was no news to him, he was beginning to look much disaffected. He mechanically moved away from the anvil upon which Satan had made himself so much at home. He came and stood outside, with arms still folded, leaning against the door.

"An' pa'son's eyes war opened anew," Bassett drawled on. "An' thar, he say, whilst the wrastlin' war a-goin' on, an' the dancer war a-dancin' an' a-shakin' his foot all around the floor, an' the fiddler war a-playin' an' the fire war a-flarin' red an' a-flamin' white over 'em all, an' Clem war a-laffin' an' a-hollerin', tickled ter death, an' a-playin' his kyerds, an' Satan war a-lookin' over his shoulder an' grin-nin' till the smoke shot out'n his nose, an' eyes, an' ears, an' ye could see him spit fire wunst in a while, the back winder o' the forge opened slow. An' thar stood on the outside — who d' ye reckon?"

"Oh, shucks!" said Clem uneasily.

The others said nothing, and the narrator went on: —

"The back winder o' the shop opened, an' thar, holdin' the batten shutter in his han', plain, — it bein' so dark a-hint him an' so light inside, — war Clem hisself! Like he mought look in death, white, an' solemn, an' stony, a-gazin' in on hisself ez he looks in life, hearty, an' sun-

burnt, an' laffin', an' a-playin' o' kyerds, with the devil, tickled ter death, peepin' over his shoulder. An' pa'son say the bleached, white, dead Clem ketched his eye of a suddint, an' clap! bang! the winder war shet, an' thar war n't nuthin' settin' on the anvil, an' Clem war a-gapin', an' a-stretchin' his arms, an' sayin' 't war bed-time, an' tellin' that Jeemes boy ter quit playin' the fool with that bellows, else he'd shoe him all round with red-hot horse-shoes."

Teck Jepson listened in silence, his absorbed eyes upon the ground, now and then lifting them to the narrator's face with a glance of excited surprise.

The person most nearly interested in the chronicle spoke abruptly: —

"Pa'son Donnard never see sech ez that, sure enough; he air sorter moon-eyed, ef the truth war knowed. An' ez the boys war a-dancin' an' a-cavortin', he jes' 'lowed he see it."

"Pa'son Donnard would n't be the fust, ef he *did* see the devil," argued Teck Jepson. "Plenty o' them the Bible tells about seen him."

The blacksmith's eyes had no merry twinkle in them now. He looked off loweringly at the scene, so familiar to him in its multitudinous phases, as he spoke.

"Waal, I don't b'lieve pa'son see nuthin'. Satan don't lope round in Broomsaidge none ginerally; never war seen afore. Takes pa'son ter view him. An' I ain't dead," he added, with a live insistence. "An' yit he seen me dead."

"Ye will be some day," said Jepson bluntly.

Sanders looked down, darkly frowning.

"Whyn't he take somebody else ter go lookin' inter a winder at thar dead se'fs, stiddier me?" he complained. "I ain't the only mortial man in the Cove! I jes' did n't know fur awhile what I war goin' ter do 'bout'n it. An' at las' I went up ter pa'son's house, an' I called his son Jube out. An' I say ter Jube, 'Jube, ye an' me hev been power-



ful frien'ly since we useter play 'longside o' one another in the woodpile, 'fore we could walk. An' I hope I won't break none o' yer bones ez ye can't spare or git the doctor ter set agin right handy, kase I'm useter hammerin' tougher stuff 'n ye be. But I'm a-goin' ter take yer dad's visions out on ye, bein' ez I can't thrash a old man an' a preacher. Ye'll see mo' sights 'n ever he done."

"What did Jube do?" asked Jepson.

A dreary sense of futility was expressed in the strong man's face.

"Flung his arm around my neck, an' begged an' begged," he said, baffled. "He 'lowed his dad wanted ter break up them meetin's at the forge, — gredges we-uns our fun. He never war young hisself, ye know." He attempted to point the weak sarcasm with a sneer. "But Jube sneaks off, an' kems ter the forge every chance he gits. He war thar the night o' the vision. Old man war so bent on seein' Satan, an' dead folks ez air live an' hearty, he did n't see his own son Jube 'mongst the sinners. An' Jube war a-walkin' round on his hands, like a plumb catamount, with his heels six feet high up in the air, a-wavin' round."

"Mebbe that war why he did n't see Jube, his head bein' so nigh the groun'," suggested Jepson. "Jube don't ginerally kerry his heels a-top o' him."

The blacksmith listened, but made no response.

"I told Jube," he resumed presently, "I'd let him off, ef his dad did n't put me in none o' his preachin'."

"Ev'ybody in Brumsaidge an' the mountings round knows 'bout'n it, ennyhow," said Eli Strobe. "Ye need n't be so powerful partic'lar."

"Waal, ennyhows, 't would in an' about kill me ef he war ter go ter blatin' out in the church-house, 'fore all the congregation, 'bout the devil a-laffin' at me whilst playin' kyerds, an' me dead, lookin' through the winder at my live self. Shucks!"

This unique slander had sunk deep into Clem Sanders's

good-natured heart. He looked so harried and hopeless that he might well have excited sympathy, but the circumstance had certain grotesque phases which Eli Strobe could not fail to relish.

"Ye hain't done no work sence on that anvil, hev ye?" he demanded, with his slow side-glance and his air of burly jocundity, which did not always commend itself to his interlocutor.

The blacksmith shook his head.

"Waal, sir," exclaimed Eli, bringing his tilted chair upon its forelegs with an abrupt thump, and placing a hand on either knee, "ef ye an' that thar striker o' yourn gits enny mo' afeard o' that thar anvil 'n ye hev always been, all the critters in the Cove 'll be bar'foot 'fore long."

"Clem's jes' a-purtendin'," said Gideon Dake. "He war a-workin' night afore las'. What ails ye ter be sech a liar, Clem? Ye want us ter gin ye the credit o' bein' convicted o' sin an' acceptin' o' warnin's, whenst ye air jes' sodden in the ways o' the worl'."

"I war n't at the forge, night afore las'," said the blacksmith, flustered and uncertain. "What would I be a-doin' of, workin' of a night? I ain't kep' busy in the day, let alone bein' obligated ter work of a night."

"I dunno what ye war a-doin' of," said Dake, altogether unaware of the significance of his disclosure. "*I know* the forge fire war lighted, an' the anvil a-ringin', an' the bel-lows a-blowin', an' the hand-hammer an' sledge a-strikin', fur I hearn 'em 'bout midnight, kase I war obligated ter go arter the doctor fur granny, ez war tuk powerful bad, an' looked like ter die."

Sanders gazed at the speaker in blank amazement for a moment. Then his color began to change. He grew as pale as his swarthy tints might ever blanch, — an ashen pallor, — like that white Thing, perhaps, which Parson Donnard had beheld gazing into the window at its hale and full-pulsed simulacrum. Was it this that repaired to the

forge in the dead of the night, and kindled the fires and beat out that metallic melody, as familiar to him as the sound of his own voice?

"Who strikes fur me, then, I wonder?" he said to himself; he was beginning to adopt this pallid, and joyless, and solemn identity. A sudden recollection of the malevolent presence on the anvil, a suggestion of an association with him as striker, and all at once Clem gave way. "Move up thar on that log!" he cried, as he sank down by the other men, outside of the forge where he had spent all his days since first he was old and strong enough to strike for his father, succeeding at last from the sledge to the hand-hammer, which the elder had laid down forever. He had never thought to shrink from its very walls, to glance back over his shoulder into its familiar dusky recesses, and wince in prophetic dread of what he might chance to see. His heart beat so loud, with so erratic and tumultuous a throb, that he wondered the other men did not hear, did not notice his agitation. They had not appreciated the significance of this testimony to him who had been asleep at home on that night and at that hour, when the forge fire was kindled in the midnight, and the anvil rang, and so strange an essence as that pallid identity of a live man so strangely busied itself, and handled his tools, and aped his gestures, and did his work. "Knows jes' whar ter find things, — hammer, an' nails, an' swage, an' tongs, I reckon." The others were talking of trivial matters. How could they? he wondered. And then he was glad that they could, and that they noted him not, had forgotten him.

An old dog had trotted over from Eli Strobe's, — the dog which Teck Jepson had recognized as the property of the "frequent visitor." He came along with the easy, confident manner appertaining to both dogs and people who are more highly appreciated than they deserve; for he was not useful, being too good-natured for a watch-dog, and having no particular nose for game and no compensating energy or

joy in its pursuit, and he was by no means comely. His long tongue lolled out, his eyes looked hot. He showed no signs of recognition of any of the men, but sat down gravely in front of them.

"I b'lieve that thar old dog hain't got no owner," Jepson said tentatively to Eli Strobe, with a craft of which he was ashamed. "Yer darter tole me the t'other day 't warn't hern."

Eli Strobe's slow side-glance was directed toward the long-haired youth, who lay at length on the grass, and who had not spoken. "Andy's," he said curtly, — "Andy Longwood's."

Jepson felt the blood mount to his face. So *this* was the "frequent visitor," whose name she would not speak; this was the riddle she had left him to guess, — this long-haired, curly-pated creature. "I'd shear him like a sheep," he said contemptuously to himself.

The young man, at the sound of his name, turned upward a gentle, placid face. "Talkin' ter me?" he drawled slowly.

Eli Strobe gave him a side-long glower, and shook his head.~

"Sheep, fur true!" Jepson thought, scanning his mild countenance. "I'll be bound he kin say 'Ba-a!'" He looked with an easy contempt after the young fellow, as he rose and strolled away, the old dog at his heels. "Ef ennybody war ter take a notion ter Marcelly Strobe, he need n't mind that thar leetle chuckle-headed Woolly." Jepson watched Andy Longwood take his way toward Eli Strobe's cabin without one qualm of distrust or displeasure. This the vaunted "frequent visitor"!

So strong a factor is jealousy in sentiment at this stage that, relieved of his unacknowledged apprehensions, Jepson's sudden assumption that he had only a sort of paternal or fraternal interest in Marcella, equally divided with the cal-low Isabel, was altogether sincere, and he was unaware of

those subtle mental processes by which he was self-deceived. He produced much the same impression upon himself that he did on Eli Strobe, when he said with a casual smile, "He's a-danglin' arter Marcelly, ain't he?"

Eli Strobe sullenly nodded. "He mought ez well dangle off, too." He cast an authoritative side-glance at Jepson, which intimated the possibility of paternal interference in matters of the heart. "Marcelly ain't sech ez ter take a likin' ter him, but somehow she can't git rid o' the critter."

"I hev hearn," said Joe Bassett animatedly, "ez how Marcelly and Clem" — the blacksmith had strolled off, his hands in his pockets, his hat pulled far over his gloomy face — "hev been keepin' comp'ny tergether."

There was no cloud now upon the paternal brow. But Eli Strobe affected doubt or ignorance. "No countin' on gals; no way ter find 'em out. They will ter-day, an' they won't ter-morrer, like the wind blows. Yes, sir." He rose ponderously from his chair. "Waal, Teck," he continued, "I be powerful sorry ye won't bide along o' we-uns ter-night. I never done ye this-a-way, whenst I war on the mounting."

For Jepson had declined his hospitality, and had expected to ride up the mountain before dark. He hesitated now, and glanced toward the gray little cabin, with its background of a roseate sky and an amethystine mountain. A flutter among the vines, — a flitting blue dress, was it? How the grudging distance denied him!

"Ax me agin!" he exclaimed, letting his hand fall heavily on his host's arm. And so they strolled toward the cabin together.

Clement Sanders, moodily loitering along the river bank, followed them with anxious eyes.

"All them cussed critters a-waitin' on Marcelly! She'll take a notion ter some o' 'em, whilst I'm bein' lured by Satan. I reckon I ain't been doin' right; them kyerds hed a snare in 'em surely. I never won nuthin' sca'cely,

nohow, an' it 'll go powerful hard with me ter lose Marcelly at sech a game."

Everything spoke of approaching night. The long, low nocturnal susurrus of the woods was already on the air. A bat came noiselessly flitting past. The color was fading out of the west. A whip-poor-will plained in the dense foliage hard by. A wind, willful wanderer, had sprung up somewhere, and was abroad in the slopes. The forge fire had not been kindled that day, and the ashes were gray on the hearth. He went within, despite some secret perturbation, and with the care characteristic of a good workman saw that his tools were in place; he closed the doors, fastened the shutters, and betook himself homeward. He paused when he had nearly reached home and looked back. How lonely was the dark little shanty, with the looming mountain beetling above, — how far from any other building! Anything might happen there.

The late moon came stealing into the broad, uninclosed passage between the two rooms of his mother's house, before he had finished his supper. He looked at it from the dusky red glow of the room, but half illumined by the smouldering fire, as he sat at the table, and strove to answer his mother's chat, and to eat and drink with a normal appetite. The sheen was melancholy and white, and the leaves of the vines that it limned on the floor scarcely stirred. A bird — a wren, perhaps, some tiny, house-loving thing — had built in their midst; a colorless simulacrum of the circular nest, of the delicate shape within, the head and bill distinct, was on the puncheons. But presently she put her head beneath her wing, and then one might hardly have distinguished amidst the tracery of the shadows the nest from a leaf of the gourd vines or from the globular fruit itself. When he strode up the ladder, presently, to the roof-room, he found the moon there, too, in the homely and solitary place. The glittering square of the tiny window lay on the floor; a soft irradiation from it seemed to enrich the

narrow, tent-like space. He noted the glimmer on the white bark of a gigantic poplar hard by, and the low hanging branches of the beech. It was very still without: no dog barked, no foot stirred,—only the insistent cry of the cicada, and the sylvan chant of the stream as it hied down the mountain-side, in the lonely splendors of the night. “Seems ef they war laffin’ an’ talkin’ at Strobe’s, I mought hear ’em hyar,” he said. He longed to join them, and yet he doubted. He was in no mood for company. “I be ez mum ez a dumb one,” he said. “I don’t want ter set thar tongue-tied, an’ let them other fellers show off talkin’.” And still he doubted. Mental perturbation wrought upon his resources as toil could not. He sank down in a chair, and bent his head upon his hand, while he cogitated.

Suddenly, he saw that the moon had changed in the sky. The trees without caught the light from another quarter. He had slept for hours. He sprang to his numb feet, and bent down to the tiny aperture to look out. The next moment his heart seemed to stand still.

Far along the broad moonlit vista between the mountain and the cliffs of the gorge, he saw the little forge, with the looming heights above; and could it be that here and there lines of red light gleamed through its ill-chinked walls? And did he hear, or did he fancy, vibrating in the midnight, the clink-clank of the hammer and the sledge, the sound he knew so well? For one instant the strongest feeling within him was the instinct of an outraged proprietor. And in that instant he reached out of the window, seized the shining beech boughs so close at hand, and swung down to the ground, having paused only to slip into his long boot-leg a “shootin’ iron” for the intimidation of the unknown trespasser. He was on his feet and in the road before he remembered that other self, his strange, white-faced double, that lurked about the forge and opened the shutter to look in upon its hilarious image. Not the first time had it kindled the fires and wielded the hammer, he recollected

with a chilly thrill. Had not the chance wayfarer noted the uncanny sounds of forging in the night, while he, the smith, was lying far away in a deep sleep?

He was advancing mechanically along the road. Suddenly he paused. He could not face It; he would not encounter Its gaze. What a frightful thing to stand and meet It! He fell to trembling, and with his sleeve wiped the cold drops from his brow. How dark the mountains gloomed! With what a sense of silence was the moon endowed! Pacing the woods in stately guise, like some fair maiden, lily-crowned, — who hath heard her step?

He still stood looking forward uncertainly, his courage faltering, his intention vacillating. All at once he lifted his head to the sound of the forge, the clinking and the clanking of the hammer and the sledge. Regular, sonorous, unceasing, it was. "*He* oughter understand the biz'ness," he thought. And he rolled up his sleeve, and wondered if the pallid resemblance wielded an arm like that.

He had turned about to go home. And yet he paused in the way, looking back over his shoulder. The idea exerted a morbid fascination upon him. He hardly trusted his resolve; he knew that he was toying with a temptation; he expected to flee even when he advanced, as he turned once more and ran fleetly, deftly, down the road toward the place. What if he should meet It running too! Would It seem so horrible to him but for the thought of that solemn pallor, that stony stillness, on Its face? More than once he paused and turned, only to change about again, and run swiftly toward the forge. A new terror presently beset him as he neared the building. He could no longer flee; he could not turn his back upon the forge, for the ghastly fear of what might issue forth and pursue. Perhaps the familiar sounds of the forging had unconsciously some bracing effect upon his nerves. He was near enough now to hear the anvil ring and ring. Once he fancied a word was spoken, and then only the crash of the sledge following the



imperative clink of the hand-hammer ; his practiced ear detected the difference in the vibrations when the smith smote the face of the anvil instead of the metal in process of forging, as a signal that the blows of the sledge should cease. "Jes' like me!" he thought; and like any other smith, he knew. The blows had quickened anew, and rang out resonantly when he was close at hand. Now and again the heavy sighing of the bellows burst forth, and the light of the fanned fire flared through the chinking. He stole cautiously to the window,—the window, he remembered, through which It had looked at him. His hand was upon the shutter when he caught his foot in a vine of the dense undergrowth, and came heavily to the ground, with a noisy thud and a commotion of dislodged stone and gravel rolling beneath his feet.

Instantly the place was dark and silent. He drew himself up, bruised and shaken, and ran limping around to the door. It was closed. He pulled it open, and the pale moonlight fell through the broad aperture, revealing the empty and dusky place. A few coals glowed slumberously beneath the sooty hood. He could not at once remember whether he had left fire here. He doubted his senses. Had he seen aught, heard aught? Stay! the anvil, telltale, was still softly ringing, ringing,—fine and faint metallic tones. He could hardly have said why this obedience to natural laws should shake his superstition, but with the conviction that the intrusion was of human agency, he ran out into the night, and roused the echoes with his wild halloo. How they tossed the word to and fro! How they hailed the further steeps, and how the savage heights replied! And when he had listened until all had sunk to silence, a far and faint "Halloo!" from the vague upper air startled him with a chill tremor. He suddenly began to reflect that he had found both door and shutter closed, and this place, sounding and alight one moment, dark and silent and empty the next. As to the fire, he trembled to think

where it might have been kindled. And the anvil, — would it not ring if that pallid simulacrum of a smith should smite it? With these thoughts he betook himself home, leaving the forge silent and dark behind him, although he often sought with a fearful fancy to think it alight once more, and to hear the ringing of the anvil or the melancholy sighing of the bellows.

## V.

MARCELLA was spinning on the porch, when Teck Jepson and her father came through the corn-field toward the cabin, — spinning at the little flax-wheel, as she sat in a low chair, her foot on the treadle. The jack-bean vines that hung above her head blossomed lilac and white; the amethystine mountain looming behind the gray roof was gradually turning a darksome purple; the blue and curling smoke that issued from the stick-and-clay chimney made spiral progress up and up the slope. The zenith was a lustreless golden hue, and the west was crimson and burned with a passion of color, and the evening star was kindling. The daylight lingered, nevertheless, and as the girl drew out the long fine fibre of the flax, it glistened yellow, while the wheel whirled, and she seemed to be spinning sunbeams. Her face was serene, though unsmiling, and she sat silent, while the swift wheel whirred and whirred, and a katydid clamored in the gourd-vines hard by. Amidst their luxuriant tangles a firefly sent forth a fluctuating gleam.

It was some moments before Jepson noted Andy Longwood, the "frequent visitor," sitting on the steps of the porch, or heeded the high, chirping voice of the callow Isabel, who evidently carried on most of the conversation. The young fellow's fair hair floated down upon his shoulders in loose ringlets, as he leaned back among the gourd-vines. He had a pensive brow, a long, curling dark lash, a large and tranquil eye.

"Dad-burned purty little Woolly, I'll swear," Teck Jepson commented to himself, while courteously saluting Eli Strobe's mother, who had instantly come to the door to re-

ceive him, and had sat down in a chair in the porch, folding her knotted hands peacefully in her lap. She was a thin, active, wizened little woman, considerably below the average height, and there were some sharp suggestions of mental agility, as well as physical, in her quick dark eyes. Her feet did not quite touch the floor, and as she stayed them on a rung of the chair she seemed rather perched than seated, and the instability of her position accented her tiny proportions. Her tall, burly, and deliberate son bore no trace of likeness to her, and she often observed, with the manner of discarding all responsibility for him, that he was "his dad over agin." This "dad" of his had evidently not been an ornament to his sphere, and if he had met joy in his final estate it was well, since he had left peace behind him. For thirty years his relict had worn that peculiar freshened, released aspect common to many widows, and it was in Eli's most stubborn moods that she usually felt called upon to mention the filial resemblance.

Teck Jepson strode up the steps, including the two girls in the cursory glance which he bestowed upon the rest of the party, and a succinct "Howdy." There was something always impressive in his height, his gait, and his imperious face, and Marcella was vaguely awed. Her hand trembled upon the thread she was spinning, and it broke beneath her touch. She did not have the voice, somehow, to join in the soberly piped "Howdy" with which Isabel returned the salutation. Jepson gave the "frequent visitor" no further notice, and he held himself sedulously aloof from the younger people, accepting a chair on the porch which Eli Strobe tendered him, and looking over their heads at the waning sunset-tide.

"Waal, Teck," Mrs. Strobe observed, after the greetings, "how d' ye like livin' up on the high mounting?"

She turned upon him her bright eyes, set very close together, like the small Isabel's, and her dry lips distended in a faint smile, and then became speciously grave, as if they meant to keep all the fun to themselves.

"It don't make no differ to me, Mis' Strobe," he answered, — his rich, melancholy voice seemed to constrain the air to silence, and caused a remark of the "frequent visitor" to halt upon his lips, as he looked up with mute, respectful curiosity at the new-comer. "Whar the sperit leads me I will foller."

Mrs. Strobe tossed her head aggressively; she had scant faith in any holiness save her own, and less patience with its assertion. And thus it was that she herself spoke now as one of the uncovenanted: —

"Ef I war you-uns, I 'd wisht the sperit hed better taste 'n ter lead me whar M'ria Bowles hed set up *her* staff. Ef the sperit could do no better leadin' 'n that fur *me*, I 'd jes' turn in an' blaze out my own road. Yes, sir."

She turned her head suddenly, and looked at him with incongruous daring, like a reckless wren.

"Need n't tell me nuthin' 'bout M'ria Bowles," she continued, taking her knitting out of her pocket, — "she war always a hard, tantrum-y gal, with the kind o' good looks ez I hed ruther be ugly than hev hed."

She twisted the yarn around her little finger to restrain its presumable impetuosity, and the needles began to twinkle as they moved. Then she proceeded, with triumphant disregard of logic: —

"I tried an' tried ter git Eli ter tell suthin' 'bout'n her, arter he went a-visitin' up in the mounting at Ben Bowles's house. But 'Yes 'm' an' 'Naw 'm' air all ez he hev got fur his mother nowadays, bein' ez I can't vote fur him. Eli air so 'feared he 'll git somebody set agin him 'fore the 'lection, by telling' suthin' he said or did n't say, he air mighty nigh mum! His tongue 'll limber out arter awhile, though, ye mark my words. Time the polls air closed he 'll know whether his soul's his own or no."

Eli Strobe sat under this criticism with an impassiveness that could have been attained only by long practice. He gazed with somnolent, meditative eyes at the landscape, his

broad-brimmed hat pulled over his brow, his elbow upon his knee, his chin in his hand.

Marcella had flushed deeply. The spinning-wheel had ceased to whirl. She looked up, her brown eyes alight, the broken thread in her hand.

"Ye mus' hev furgot, granny," she said, her voice trembling with the effort at self-repression into due respect; "dad tole ye a heap 'bout the folks on the mounting."

"Till we war both tired out'n with the name o' Bowles," put in the uncompromising Isabel.

"He tole ye Mis' Bowles war good-lookin' ez ever, an' her husband 'peared well-ter-do an' mightily tuk up with her," itemized Marcella; "an' he reckoned she treated her step-chill'n well, — leastwise they war fat enough; an' she seemed — so ter say — ez happy ez she ever war, — some lonesome, mebbe, bein' on the mounting. He tole ye, an' he tole ye!"

"Yes, he tole ye!" said Isabel, with an unfilial flirt of her tousled hair.

"An' dad *ain't* holdin' his jaw fur fear o' settin' the voters catawampus." There were tears in the deep brightness of Marcella's eyes. "He *ain't* afeard o' not gittin' 'lected. *He* kin bide by the vote ez onconsarned ez ever. It's jes' *me* an' *Is'bel* ez hev sot our hearts on his bein' lifted high, above *all* the people. *Dad ain't* 'feard."

"Naw, *dad ain't* 'feard o' nuthin'," declared Isabel, tossing her head, in the pride of "dad's" courage.

The little old woman glared down upon the youthful partisans of "dad" with an elaborate show of displeasure.

"Air Eli Strobe *yer* chile or mine?" she sourly demanded of the damsels.

This potent logic bereft them of all rejoinder.

"I *hev* 'lowed fur forty year an' better ez he war *my* chile," Mrs. Strobe continued, sarcastically. "Mebbe though I hev been mistaken."

But while she folded her arms in a pose of important

dudgeon, letting her knitting rest idly on her lap, she glanced at Teck Jepson with a sort of internal chuckle, as if to call his attention to the crushed champions.

"Mos' folks would 'low ez I hed tuk toler'ble good keer o' him without enny help from you-uns, an', bein' ez he hev throve toler'ble, it mought 'pear like I war n't likely ter do nuthin' ez would hurt him sure enough, or make him seem small ennywise. Eli Strobe hev made out ter git along fur a good many year 'thout you-uns ter take keer o' him, — 'fore Marcelly an' Is'bel war ever hearn tell on."

For the first time the bone of contention lifted his voice. Eli Strobe wished to prevent further retort on the part of his defenders.

"Shet up, chil'n," he observed, in his calm, heavy tones. "Shet up. Ye talk like ye ain't got no sense."

"Sense!" cried the sharp little dame. "Sense don't run in the fambly, ez fur ez I know it."

She did not include herself among those thus deprived. She chose to consider her departed lord the head of the family, and herself as only an interloper.

"Naw, sir," she observed, after a pause, "Eli brung no news home. I never knowed a man ez would. They gredge news to wimmin folks. But law," — she was knitting again with an appearance of great inattention to the industry, looking about over the whisking needles, — "the gals air nigh ez bad 'bout bringin' news home, ef not wuss. Ye see, Teck, I can't go 'bout much, bein' rheumatic. Ye mought 'low thar war n't enough o' me ter 'commodate much rheumatism, but I got more 'n I need. So only the gals went ter the baptizin.' Sir, they hearn nare word o' the preachin', nare whisper o' the singin', salvation seemed afar off, an' the gran'jer o' this worl' war more ter them 'n the waters o' Jordan. Yes, sir! Answer me no questions could they, — no text, no psalm, could n't even tell what saints war 'tendin' on the baptizin', nor who war saved nor who war shoutin'. Fur they war all set ter wonder over a strange

man they met a-kemin' home; special good-lookin', accordin' ter Marcellly."

"*Granny!*" cried the girl, starting up from her chair, overturning the spinning-wheel upon the surprised "*Woolly.*"

"Hold yer jaw whilst yer elders speak!" exclaimed the imperative old woman. "Good-lookin', it seemed, till Marcellly could n't rest, but hard-hearted an' cruel-eyed, fur all he hed eyes blue an' deep ez a well, accordin' ter Marcellly; an' she b'lieved he hed no religion, though pious words war on his tongue! An' I hed that man fur breakfus', an' dinner, an' supper; an' when Marcellly war plumb beat out talkin' 'bout him, Is'bel tuk her turn."

"*Granny!*" faintly reiterated Marcella, crimson and faltering, and hardly heeding Andy Longwood at her feet, as he sought to lift the wheel to its place before her, and to disengage his elbow from the "*spun-truck.*"

Isabel looked aghast from one to the other.

"Granny, it's that same man!" she cried, with a facial contortion of great significance, but which her aged relative failed to interpret. Eli Strobe looked heavily on, a little doubtful, but unable to understand the commotion.

"I know it's that same man I'm a-talkin' 'bout," Mrs. Strobe observed with dignity. "Ye did n't know his name, nare one o' ye; his looks war enough fur ye an' Marcellly, special Marcellly. An' ez ter his hard heart, an' his cruel eyes, an' his bein' a hypocrite, it's him ez hev got ter burn in Torment fur that, not Marcellly; so she rej'iced an' rej'iced in the handsome sinner, a-purtendin' ter despise him so!"

Isabel, less daunted by the situation than her sister, found strength to rise from the step where she had sat near the "frequent visitor," and faced round upon her unconscious grandmother. She relied now upon nothing less pointed than her index-finger, and as she leveled it at Jepson she declared, —



"It's *him*, granny, — him ez be a-settin' thar in the cheer!"

Mrs. Strobe's jaw dropped, as the realization of the social enormity of which she had been guilty was borne in upon her. She turned her faltering eyes upon Jepson, who sat beside her motionless. He was outwardly calm. His brow bore only a slight corrugation that could hardly be called a frown. His face was impassive; perhaps its imperious and lofty suggestions were accented by a touch of disdain, but in his eyes his anger burned undisguised. Mrs. Strobe appreciated now how deep they were, how blue, how full of fire, how alive with a tempestuous spirit. His long legs were stretched out before him; his hat was pushed far back from his brow, and he looked forth with a sedulous appearance of unconcern at the mustering shadows. She remembered in dismay the opprobrious epithets, — cruel-eyed, hard-hearted, no religion, and Marcella, the candidate's daughter, despised him.

Now, for all that this old woman was so sharp of tongue, the good of her household lay very near to her heart, and her deeds were widely at variance with her words. Moreover, her pride in her son was very great, and Eli himself was not a more watchful and cautious politician than she, when need arose. A breach of hospitality was not less abhorrent to her than an infringement of the ten commandments; but hard upon the sense of her discourtesy came a poignant and politic monition for the interests of the impending election.

"Teck! Teck!" she cried, quaveringly, "'t war n't *ye* ez them two sillies met an' 'lowed war a strange man?"

"I tole ye, granny," declared the self-sufficient Isabel, buffeted by the storm of emotions the crisis had roused, but gallantly weathering it, — "I tole ye he 'lowed ez he didn't know me an' Marcella, but he knowed dad, an' he war kin ter Ben Bowles. *Kin ter Bowles*, — I *said* it, an' I *said* it."

"Shet up! Who knows ye an' Marcellly, ennyhows? Marcellly hev shot up hyar like Jonah's gourd in a single night, — tall ez a bean-pole an' seventeen year old. I'll be bound ennybody ez hed nuthin' ter do but ter medjure Marcellly would find an inch lengthwise onter her fur every day she lives. *Who* knows ye an' Marcellly, ennyhows? Powerful fine folks ter know, I'll be bound! Teck," — she turned suavely to the visitor, — "ye ain't tellin' me 't war *you-uns* sure enough, what I hev knowed sence ye war a-toddlin' roun' yer mam's knee — a mighty good 'oman she war, an' the end she made war a sampler to the saints, fur I war thar an' see her takin' off — bless the Lord fur the saints! — 't war n't *ye*, Teck, ez them gals war a-makin' sech a miration over, ez ef they hed fund a mare's nest?"

"Yes 'm," he assented quietly, "'t war me."

She noted the heavy frown gathering in the shadow of Eli Strobe's big hat, drawn far over his brow. He cast a slow glance toward the group; then maintaining his mute, surly dignity, he gazed steadfastly forward at the glooming mountains.

Marcella, still grave and silent, had risen from her chair, more circumspectly this time, and the spinning-wheel was not overturned, although the "frequent visitor" put up his arm to guard against it. He had been greatly edified by the disastrous commotion in the conversation, and had briskly turned his placid face, lighted with an animation that might have hitherto seemed impossible, from one speaker to the other. A shade of regret crossed it as he noted Marcella's movement, but it was in a jocosely undertone that he demanded, "Whar be ye a-travelin' ter, Marcellly?"

"I be a-goin' ter dish up supper," she answered stiffly, and with her voice at its usual pitch. She held herself a trifle more erect than usual; some sudden defiant intimations of pride were perceptible in her manner, as she threaded her way through the group, but in passing Jepson her long lashes swept her red cheek, for she could not encounter his gaze.

"I'll be bound everything air burnt ter a crisp," said the officious Isabel, but looking hopefully over her shoulder into the dusky brown interior. It was lighted only by the smouldering fire, that cast a gigantic shadow of the slight Marcella upon ceiling and walls, and a grotesquely magnified and frightful image of the old hound. For the dog of the "frequent visitor" was singularly accomplished in accurately understanding the English language, and had sprung up with much youthful alacrity upon the mere mention of supper.

He had followed the girl into the room, and sat beside the hearth, watching with anticipative delight each dish as it was borne to the table, licking his chaps with a zestful expression; now rising up suddenly, and then composing himself to sit down again, while his shadow on the wall made queer genuflections and obeisances to the table, with all the ardent spirit of a gourmand.

Without, the old woman seized the opportunity. She sat for a moment demurely silent; then, shaking with her internal chuckle, she said in a low tone to Teck, —

"Marcelly's plumb outdone, I know, 'kase *ye* hev fund out ez she war streck with yer good looks, Teck, an' called ye han'some. Laws-a-massy, gals air mighty purblind an' foolish critters; they think the men air gin over ter studyin' 'bout'n 'em, an' tryin' ter sense what they mean, when the fellers, mos' likely, air jes' standin' with thar arms a-kimbo, a-lookin' at the weather-signs, an' a-wonderin' what the chances air fur huntin' ter-morrer."

She glanced toward Jepson with a laugh, expectant of ready acquiescence. But there was upon his face, distinct enough even in the closing shadows, an expression so haughty, so aloof and unresponsive, that the little dame was at first perturbed and troubled, but presently grew angered in turn.

"A spiteful sinner!" she exclaimed to herself; "mad now, jes' 'kase Marcelly 'lowed he hed no religion, — an' he ain't got none."

All her facile cleverness was roused, however, and she was mindful, too, of the interests of the approaching election. Thus, although she struck, it was with a cautious hand and a crafty insight.

"But I reckon mos'ly," she said, lowering her voice cautiously, "ez Marcelly war tormented, bein' feared ez Clem Sanders mought hear somehows ez she hed been streck with yer good looks. I'll be bound *that* skeered her."

She forbore for a moment to mark how her shaft had sped. She sat motionless, her feet perched on the rung of the chair, and she looked very small and unintentional, and reflective, as she placidly contemplated the night scene. The fireflies fluctuated in the dank shadows, that gloomed duskily about the porch; now close at hand, now a momentary gleam far away in a bosky tangle, still multiplying, till they seemed some elusively glittering network spread as a snare for the darkness. The mountains had become invisible in the blackness, save for their rigid summit-lines against the sky. The frogs chanted by the water-side, and katydids were monotonously shrilling in the orchard. The grating of Teck Jepson's chair on the floor, as he abruptly shifted his position, was the only sound that broke upon the quiet with the jarring effect of interruption, and as Mrs. Strobe turned she saw his face thrown into strong relief by the rays of a tallow dip within, which Marcella had just kindled. The white light streamed forth as far as the great gourd-leaves behind his head, eliciting their faint green color with the interstices of olive-hued shadows. His face had relaxed; it was haughty no longer. There was an alert anxiety in the blue eyes which the mountain girl fancied so deep. He had taken off his hat, and pushed back his dark hair from his forehead. He was frowning a little, and yet he hardly noticed the sudden flare of light upon his face; his compressed lips had softened, had parted. He said nothing. Another voice came out of the darkness: —

"I dunno what Clem Sanders mought undertake ter set hisse'f up ter git mad fur, 'kase Marcelly 'lows ez this one or that one air good-lookin'," "Woolly" spoke up, with an acrimony and a decision which showed that his discourse was not exclusively confined to the placid "baa." "Clem Sanders hain't got no right ter say nuthin' 'bout good-lookin' folks, the Lord above knows, all marked up with cinders an' soot ez he be. I'll be bound Marcelly ain't a-goin' ter interrupt herse'f studyin' 'bout what Clem Sanders thinks 'bout good looks."

"What ye talkin' 'bout? Hev yer senses deserted ye?" the grandmother remarked to the "frequent visitor," with a tart familiarity induced, perhaps, by the frequency of his visits. "Ye can't expect a blacksmith ter be nuthin' but cindery an' sooty, — like folks ez plow gits miry. None ter choose 'twixt 'em, I'm a-thinkin'."

"I know that." Andy Longwood made a feint of acquiescence; then continued droningly, as one who has a grievance, "But Marcelly ain't mindin' Clem Sanders, — else she ain't the gal I take her fur. Looks so grizzly an' sooty, I ain't s'prised none ef the Satan ez Pa'son Donnard seen settin' on the anvil in the forge warn't nuthin' but Clem hisself."

"Shucks!" said the uncompromising Isabel. "*He* hed wings an' hawns, 'cordin' ter pa'son, an' Clem hain't nare one."

"Waal, I don't keer," growled "Woolly." "Clem's a sight ter be seen, a scandal ter the jaybirds."

"That don't make no differ!" cried the little old woman, stanch in argument. "Blacksmithin' air a powerful fine business; the folks in Brumsaidge could n't git along 'thout Clem. An' afore him, — shucks! way back in the Bible times they hed smiths, an' I reckon they war ez sooty an' cindery then ez now; dirt ain't improved none noways, ez I onderstan', sence them days. Thar war a man then, what, the Bible speaks respec'fully of, by the name o' Tubal Cain,

— a cunning workman, — war n't thar, Teck?" She appealed to him with animation as to a Biblical authority, expecting an eager and interested response; but he only said, "Yes 'm," with an evident effort, cleared his throat, and was silent.

Eli Strobe had risen in obedience to some signal from indoors. "Kem in ter supper." His big voice rumbled out with all its wonted intonations of hospitality. If Jepson had not been otherwise absorbed, he might have noted the candidate's self-control remarkable in so tantalizing an episode. It did not escape Mrs. Strobe's keen attention, and she deported herself with a trifle of gay bravado, feeling beyond the reach of retribution, since the dictates of policy so hampered deserts.

"Waal, sir, eatin' supper by a tallow dip, — who ever hearn the beat!" remarked Isabel. "A leetle mo', an' we would all hev gone ter bed hongry."

"It do be a powerful late supper." Mrs. Strobe had a slightly harried aspect; if conscience abode within her, it wielded its power in her housewifely instincts. "Be ye hongry, Teck, — ye an' Andy an' Eli? It's all Marcelly's fault, a-furgittin' ter dish up supper till nigh on ter bed-time. An' me, too: I jes' sot an' talked, I will 'low, ez ef my tongue war tied in the middle an' workin' at both e-ends."

The feeble focus of the candle dully glowed in the centre of the table, sending out a subdued glimmer upon the faces that surrounded it amidst the encompassing obscurity. A vague glimpse was had of the smoke-blackened ceiling just above, with a rich dash of color where a cluster of strings of red peppers hung. The walls darkly merged into shadows; the fire was a smouldering, tawny-tinted coal; the ceaseless night sounds came through the open door, — the chirring of insects, the sigh of the woods, and the fret of the torrent. As Marcella waited upon them, she was invisible most of the time in the dark periphery of the circle:

occasionally there were transitory visions of the fair dispenser of hospitality, the white light falling on her delicate face, and floating hair, and rounded arm, and deft hand, as perchance she leaned forward and tendered the cracked blue bowl of honey to one or the other of the guests; then only an alert, noiseless shadow, slipping about in the kindred gloom.

It was a silent meal, albeit the little old dame and Isabel were among the partakers. When they all repaired again to the porch, they found the moonlight there, with yellow slanting rays and long, melancholy shadows, and the distorted waning disk itself hung in the purple spaces above the black mountain that the house faced. The fireflies were quenched; only now and then a feeble gleam stole forth from a dark cluster of gourd-leaves. The perfume of the orchard was sweet on the air; the dew glittered on the low summits of the old gnarled trees. The men and the old woman lighted their pipes, and the coterie silently smoked, while Marcella sat on the steps of the porch, in the full radiance of the midsummer sheen, her idle hands folded upon one knee, her lustrous eyes turned upward to the moon, the wind lightly tossing her curling hair. Within, the candle still sputtered, while Isabel washed the dishes and pans,—this being her allotted task,—and made a great clatter to better express her industry.

It was all very still without; a constraint oppressed the group. Each had regrets in the premises, and harbored resentments. The occupation of smoking, the meditative languor which the consumption of tobacco warrants, precluded the necessity for conversation, and afforded an interval for the recuperation of the downcast spirits of the company. Small wonder that Clem Sanders, listening from his roof-room window, heard no laughing or talking at Strobe's!

Suddenly the shrill clamor of a screech-owl invaded the nocturnal quietude; again and yet again, with its sinister, mirthless chuckle supplementing and seeming to ridicule its

own hysteric outcry. It grated upon the nerves of Mrs. Strobe, already subjected to some unusual tension.

"Laws-a-massy, jes' listen ter that thar n'isy fow-el. He be a-goin' ter screech thar haffen the night, I'll be bound; an' he air a sure sign o' death, ter holler nigh a chimbly. Jes' listen at him, now, a-laffin' at the corpse!" Once more the low, joyless, mocking merriment jarred the air. "Take yer dad's gun thar, Marcelly, an' run down in the orchard, an' fire it off at him. He be right yander in that thar sheep-nose apple-tree."

Marcella rose slowly. "I'll drive him off," she said, "but I ain't a-goin' ter fire no gun off at him; the critter hev got ez good a right ter live ez I hev. I'll fling a sheep-nose apple at him, an' that be ez much ez I be a-goin' ter do ter him."

"Listen at the sassiness of the stiff-necked generation!" exclaimed the old woman, evidently the exordium of a tirade against the young folks nowadays. But Marcella was already far down the grassy slope, and out of hearing; and with one scornful glance after her, Mrs. Strobe put her pipe into her mouth, and sourly relapsed into silence.

The high grass, tasseled and rank, glimmered with dew. The moonlit spaces wore a finer and a fairer lustre for the deep romantic shadows that hung about the boughs. There were long and glittering arches, where the fruited branches interlaced, and in the dappling shade beneath, the boles, all at regular intervals, had a columnated effect; and these arboreal aisles seemed endless. Even the homelier incidents of the orchard shared the enchantment of the moonlight: some blight that had fallen on one of the goodly branches had bereft it of leaves and fruit, and a web that had been woven about it shone, a refulgent gauze, and radiated a delicate and fibrous splendor. Down these simple ways Marcella went, the light upon her face; her hair fluttered with the slight breeze; her step was sure and free; she seemed so ethereal that she too might have been some embellish-



ing fantasy of the night. The bird of ill-omen had ceased to cry, as if her very presence exorcised all evil fortunes. She paused, gazing upward, the moonbeams full on her shining eyes. She had lifted one arm and laid hold of a fruit-freighted bough. It seemed strange that she did not see the owl, so well she realized how it must look, up among the boughs somewhere, demurely silent, shuffling down, and suppressing, as it were, its fearful identity among its mottled feathers, its head askew as it watched her with its big yellow eyes. She had her hand upon the retributive apple; a sudden footfall, — Teck Jepson was approaching along the dewy colonnade.

The owl was safe, very safe indeed: a pity that the “fow-el” might not have known this, and have spared itself the anguish of fright that it endured, as it sat almost within arm’s length, discreetly silent, refraining from stirring claw or feather, and wisely looking down upon them.

The bough was shaking with more than the wind, for Marcella’s hand trembled on the unplucked apple.

Jepson’s hat was thrust on the back of his head. His face, too, was distinctly visible as he approached. Somehow he had never seemed to her so tall, so imperious of temper, so impressive, as now. But there was a trifle of embarrassment in his manner, and he only said, —

“Whar ’s that thar ow-el?”

“I dunno,” faltered Marcella.

He did not seem to care. His mind was evidently little concerned with the “fow-el.”

He paused, looking steadily at her, as if he expected her to speak again. But she still stood silent, the moonlight in her lustrous eyes and on her upturned face, her hand on the apple as it swung on the low bough.

“I never expected ter hear ez ye hed been talkin’ ’bout me that-a-way; I never looked fur it,” he said.

The quick color surged into her cheeks; her eyes flashed; she let go the bough so suddenly that, swinging elastically

into its place, the little owl was almost dislodged from its perch, and it tightened its toes and even slightly spread its wings to keep its balance. It uttered a low sound, a sort of mutter, that they might have heard had they not been too absorbed ; and it was with a kind of resentful dignity that it settled itself again in its feathers, and cocked its head askew, and looked down at them with its round, bright eyes.

"An' I dunno what sorter man ye kin be, ter kem makin' remarks ter me 'bout'n it," she cried indignantly.

"I hev knowed ye sech a little time, I reckon nobody would hev expected sech from you-uns," he resumed.

She stood for a moment in blank amazement. Then she seemed ready to burst into tears. "I never said it 'cept ter granny, — an' who would hev thunk o' her settin' up an' tellin' it all ter you-uns, not knowin' ye war the same one? Ye never tole we-uns yer name, that evenin'. I jes' 'lowed ye war kin ter Bowles."

"I don't keer who ye said it ter," he declared, his voice full of reproach. "I ain't keerin' fur nuthin' 'ceptin' ye thunk it, — an' I never done nuthin' ter make ye think it."

Once more she looked at him, aghast. She put up her hand again to the bough, now for the sake of support.

"Tellin' folks, an' settin' out ter b'lieve ez I be a hypercrite, an' *purtend* ter be pious, an' " —

"Oh!" she exclaimed, with a note of comprehension and relief so marked that he paused abruptly, and demanded sternly, —

"What did you-uns 'low I war talkin' 'bout?"

She did not answer. Her expression had suddenly changed, as she stood under the bough. No dryad, no ethereal native of the tree, could wear a face more airily light-some, more elfinly gay, than she, looking out through the sheen and the flickering shadow.

"Waal," said he, staring blankly at her, "What war ye a-talkin' 'bout?"

She only shook her head in gleeful silence.

"Ye never said nuthin'," he resumed, seeking to review the conversation that he might unravel its mystery, "'cept-in' I war a — a" — he stumbled at the word, — "a hypocrite, an' a sinner; — yes, an' special good-lookin', but I never minded *that*."

Her face had grown conscious again. "I reckon not," she remarked dryly.

"Ye mind that, though," he said penetratingly, at last; "that 's what ye thought I war talkin' 'bout, hey? Waal, I jes' mind ye callin' me a sinner, an' sayin' ez I *purtend* ter be pious."

He noted her instant relief at the change of the subject. "Ye don't mind folks knowin' ye called 'em sinners," he continued, "but whenst it comes ter *handsome* sinners" —

He desisted, in pity for the look in her face.

"I tell ye now, Marcellly," he said gravely, as they mechanically took their way together toward the house, "ye may 'low ez I be hard-hearted, an' cruel-eyed, an' got no religion, but I be a-goin' ter furgive ye fur them words, — like a Christian!"

It was the first wrong that he had ever overlooked. He found forgiveness easy to be exercised, and very sweet.

She stole a shy look at his face. "That 's powerful good in ye," she said softly. "I war jes' a-talkin' ter be a-talkin', an' " —

Their shadows, close together, followed them over the shining grass, and for a time they were silent as they approached the group on the porch.

He paused abruptly, and looked down at her.

"An' I don't want ye ter be aggervatin' yerse'f by 'lowin' ez I ain't goin' ter do all I kin fur Eli in the 'lection. What ye said ain't goin' ter hender. I 'll vote fur him, an' git all others I kin ter do likewise."

Marcella began to experience a sensation as of coals of fire heaped upon the head. She could only murmur, "I war jes' a-talkin' ter be a-talkin'."

That night, from time to time, as the hours wore on and the house was still, the little owl in the apple-tree lifted its voice and shrilled aloud, and laughed in sinister and chuckling mirth, while the moon slowly climbed the skies. And Mrs. Strobe, turning on an uneasy pillow, evolved bitter reflections concerning the inefficiency of the present generation.

“Sen’ two hearty young folks — one of ’em mos’ seven feet high ’ceptin’ what’s lackin’ — down inter a orchard ter fling a apple at a ow-*el* an’ drive him off, — an’ a body would think they hed invited the critter ter bide ter supper, an’ sing hyme chunes arterward.”

## VI.

WHATEVER might be the character of the nocturnal visitant of the forge, it seemed safe enough in the broad glare of sunlight; and as it was the voting-place of the district, it was by no means deserted on that momentous Thursday in August when the election was held. Marcella had felt throughout the canvass the terrible strain of suspense, but when the day had drawn near she was deprecatory of decision, and wished that if the worst must be it might not be at once.

“A body would ’low, ter hear ye a-goin’ on, that Eli war ter be hung ter-day,” her grandmother remarked, tartly. “He ain’t los’ a ounce o’ flesh nor a hour o’ sleep sence he war a candidate, an’ he went off from hyar this mornin’ high-colored ez common. An’ look at you-uns — big-eyed, an’ pale-faced, an’ lean-lookin’, an’ fluttery — drapped the blue bowl an’ bruk it in two; an’ Is’bel patterns arter ye, till thar ain’t no ch’ice fur a fool ’twixt ye. Shucks! I mus’ be mistaken,” sarcastically; “they be goin’ surely ter hang Eli.”

From time to time, during the rich and dewy morning hours, when the bees droned about the blooming clover in the orchard aisles, and the birds were abroad in the high-ways of the skies, Marcella parted the sheltering vines on the porch, that she might look forth unobserved upon the voters gradually assembling at the polls. She knew many of them by sight, and was informed concerning their disposition toward her father’s pretensions; and thus her heart weighed heavily or grew buoyant, as enemies or friends were in the majority. They came chiefly on horseback,

and there were rows of saddle-horses hitched to the rack before the wide door of the forge, and to the boughs of trees hard by, and even to the badly chinked logs of the building itself; sometimes they dully drowsed, sometimes impatiently pawed, sometimes fell to bickering together, and necessitated the interposition of their masters to readjust their status. Many of the farmers had come in ox-wagons. The teams had been unyoked, and were leisurely munching the feed, spread out in the dappling shadows upon the ground before them. Casting a vote, the inalienable right of an American citizen, seemed a lengthy and serious matter, and was not to be lightly discharged; during the main portion of the day it busied the denizens of the surrounding slopes, and thus deliberately they saved the country. The assemblage presented, therefore, something of the aspect of an exclusively masculine picnic, for such women and children as had been permitted to gratify a long-cherished hankering to "view" the populous *Settlement* had hied them decorously to the houses of various relatives, — the tender ties of consanguinity thus utilized on this auspicious occasion, — and were seen no more during the day. Old friends met, and smoked, and talked at great length. The state of crops in various localities elicited anxious inquiries; old gossip that had been on its last legs suddenly developed a new and brisk pair of limbs, and circulated like a fresh scandal. Parson Donnard could not have failed to hear his name excitedly coupled with that of the devil, as he threaded his way through the crowd; but mindful of his vision, he placed no false nor sensitive interpretation upon this association, and there was an elongation of his thin compressed lips which in an ungodly man one might have thought singularly like a smile of flattered vanity. The heavy jeans-clad mountaineers reverently made way for him, and there was a perceptible abatement of the guffaws and slowly drawled jokes as he passed. But as in more cultured communities, the observance and the feeling were

not always in close compatibility, and the criticism he encountered was as if he were of this world.

"I dunno why pa'son be 'lowed ter vote," said Joe Bassett, as he sprawled on the protruding roots of a tree; two mountaineers perched hard by on the tongue of an ox-wagon from which the team had been released, and a third reclined on a saddle which he had thrown upon the ground. "Pa'son can't run fur nuthin'," continued Bassett; "he can't go ter the Legislatur', nor nuthin', nor be sher'ff. They don't let preachers hold office, nor butchers set on a crim'nal jury," — thus seeking in his ignorance to reconcile the incongruities and oddities of the law.

"Pa'son oughter be a-studyin' 'bout a seat 'mongst the angels, stiddier gittin' registered 'mongst the qualified voters o' the deestric'," said Gideon Dake, who always confirmed Bassett's views, or added corollary matter.

"What be Teck Jepson a-bobbin' 'bout fur, like a float on a fish-line?" demanded Bassett. "Actially a-stoppin' the pa'son mighty nigh at the door of the forge. Looks ter be a-wrastlin' in prayer with the old man, — in an' about goin' ter save the pa'son's soul, fust thing ye know."

"Hain't you-uns hearn," said Dake, quickly seizing the opportunity to regale the professed gossip with a new story, "how turrible smitten Teck Jepson an' Marcelly Strobe hev got, all of a suddint? An' Teck air a-workin' fur the 'lection like he war demented. I made him beg an' beg *me* fur nigh on ter a hour ter vote fur Eli, — like I hed counted on doin' all the time. Now Teck's argufyin' with the pa'son."

"Every time I hear o' Marcelly Strobe she hev got another feller a-danglin'. 'Pears like ter me she *mus'* be a-foolin' some o' them boys," Bassett commented sourly.

"Laws-a-massy, jes' look at Teck," said Dake, laughing slightly, albeit his teeth were closed hard upon the quid of tobacco in his mouth, "he hev gin the old man his arm an' air jes' a-draggin' the pa'son up ter the polls! Would n't

trest the pa'son's word ter vote fur Eli; gone in ter see the job well done. Waal, sir," — he shifted his position as the young and the old man disappeared together within the door, — "that 's jes' the way he done me. I could n't hev got away from him, arter I hed promised ter vote for Eli, ef I hed wanted ter."

There was a momentary hiatus in the conversation, when a tall, lank man, some twenty-eight or thirty years of age, with high cheek-bones and a sunburned, narrow face, joined the group. He had a bright, quick glance, and a smouldering spark of irritation aided its effect. His countenance wore a ready and propitiatory smile, the candidate's smile, that seemed automatic in some sort, and not subject to the same springs that sufficed as motor for his other expressions. He flung himself upon a pile of shucks and hay, the forage of neighboring oxen, and he chewed a long straw as he talked.

"Hy're, boys," he said, agreeably. "How do the chances o' the 'lection 'pear ter you-uns?" For he was Joshua Nevins, a candidate for constable, and Eli Strobe's much-feared rival.

"Mighty well," said Bassett, reassuringly.

"Why n't ye go an' vote, Dake?" said the candidate, leaning forward to scan Gideon Dake's countenance.

"Ye ain't goin' ter try ter git folks ter vote twict, air ye?" said Dake, jocosely. "I hev voted wunst ter-day, an' they tells me ez that be ez off'n ez the law allows."

"I hopes ye voted the right way," said Nevins, with a bland and mollifying demonstration of the candidate's smile.

The specious Dake nodded his head convincingly. "I'll be bound I did," he said equivocally, and yet so unequivocally that the momentary fears of the candidate were set at rest.

The others, mindful of Dake's recent representations as to the casting of his vote under Teck Jepson's tutelage, experienced a certain embarrassment and preserved an awk-



ward silence, none arrogating the tact to innocuously continue the conversation. If the candidate be a wily genus, the craft of the voter is sometimes commensurate.

Nevins seemed the most innocent of men, as he himself reopened the subject. He had approached the group with the intention of merely commending himself by some timely and jocose observations, and then strolling to other coteries. He had, however, encountered unexpected opposition to-day; he had thought himself almost assured of success, and when the doubt began to arise in his mind, untutored to jeopardy, he felt himself losing his balance.

"What ails Teck Jepson, ter git so sot agin me?" he observed, anxiously. "He hev jes' been a-bouncin' aroun' electioneerin' fur Eli ter-day like — like — a chicken with its head off. I axed him awhile ago, — I beckoned him off, an I say, 'What ails ye, ter work agin me, Teck? I ain't done nuthin' ter you-uns, hev I? Air ye holdin' a gredge agin me?' An' he said, 'Don't ye know I be kin ter Eli nowadays? My half-brother married his cousin,' Teck say. Shucks! I know that ain't the reason." He glanced in plaintive interrogation at the others.

"Waal, things turns out mos'ly ez they air bid from above," said one of the men, with an unexpected attack of piety.

Nevins looked lugubriously at him. This was an arbitration to which he was not prepared to submit. He was feeling exceedingly helpless in the hands of Providence.

"I dunno 'bout that," he observed. "Things in Brumsaidge turns out mos'ly ez Teck Jepson wills, an' Providence sings mighty small."

Then reflecting that this was a dolorous prognostication on his own account, he gathered himself together as jauntily as he could, and declared, "But Teck Jepson's rule is over. Folks in Brumsaidge hev tried Eli Strobe, an' he did n't 'gree with 'em, — he seen too much '*Eli Strobe, Big Man!*' in his office, ter suit 'em; an' now they air lookin' fur a

man what jes' wants ter sarve the people, — an' that's my bes' wish."

The others sat and gazed solemnly at him, all meditatively listening. For a moment there was no sound but the munching of an ox close to him, as the beast pulled at the pile of fodder on which he reclined. As the great horns came threateningly near, he threw up his hand, and the ox drew off with a muttered low of surly dissatisfaction.

"I can't onderstan' Teck, though, — I counted on him." He returned to his grievance with a lapsing courage.

"Waal, ye mought ez well not," said an old codger, with a grin. "Hev you-uns got a darter, seventeen year old?"

The young man stared at him in amazement.

"Course I hain't."

"Waal, that's one o' the special qualifications of a candidate," continued the elderly wag. "A tall, high-steppin' darter, with long curly hair; that's what ye need, ter run agin Eli."

Nevins was silent for a moment, in painful consciousness of this lack. He was a good-natured fellow, and had thought his two small boys at home possessed of all the filial graces and values, and he had never expected to be summoned to covet a tall daughter of seventeen. He resorted to contradiction.

"That thar gal o' Eli Strobe's ain't seventeen," he declared, "nor no higher 'n my vest pocket. I know her. I useter see her constant."

"Waal, she's been agein' an' growin' sence then. Leastwise, she's tall enough an' old enough ter make Teck Jepson step around mighty spry. I ain't seen better electioneerin' fur forty year. I hed counted on the pleasure o' hevin' Eli goin' roun' hyar with his finger in his mouth, but I'm feared o' that gal o' his'n. Clem Sanders, too, war a-waitin' roun' the forge fust thing this mornin', a-pinin' fur nine o'clock, so ez the jedges would declar' the polls open, an' let him put in his vote fur Eli. His ticket 'peared ter burn his fingers till he got it inter the ballot-box."

"He in love with her, too?" asked the candidate, drearily. He had never anticipated these potent odds. What avail was it to parade the virtues of citizenship, to vaunt his capacity and his will to serve the people in the office to which he aspired, — with tricky Cupid afield!

Nevins rose presently, the straw still in his mouth, his hat pulled far over his brow, and sauntered down toward the forge. The great red and white ox instantly planted his cloven hoof where Nevins had sat, and took possession, as it were, of the pile of forage, trampling it down, that it might not afford further resting-place for loitering politicians.

The post-meridian sun was now a trifle aslant upon the valley below; purple shadows had begun to creep along the green slopes. How warm was the fragrance of the grapes, hanging upon a great vine that draped an oak from topmost bough to root, and which was pillaged as high as the arm of man could reach! The tall weeds were all resounding with the whirl of acrobatic grasshoppers, now and then leaping amazingly high into the air. Not a note came from the birds now; not a wing was astir. All the landscape shimmered through the noontide heat. The forge, where the three judges of the election sat with the precious, ballot-box, of which they were sworn not to lose sight till the polls were closed and the vote counted out, seemed a quiet and cool refuge, with its dark shadows, and its high, tent-like roof, and its ill-chinked walls, affording glimpses of the green vistas without. The little window at the rear, into which that mysterious semblance of the smith had stared, pale and reproachful, at its vigorous living self, was wide open; showing now a squirrel frisking by on the mountain slope, and now only a devious winding path amidst the greeneth up the mountain-side, with the trumpet-vine a-blooming scarlet over a gray rock, and in the low branches of an elder-bush a bird on a nest. Now and then faces were thrust in at this window, — most often young

and beardless, but sometimes old and grizzly, — to curiously scan the judges and the practical illustration of the theory of election by suffrage. 'The judges, in rickety chairs, tilted on the hind legs, demurely smoked their pipes, while the clerk sat at the pine table on which the ballot-box rested. The hearth was fireless, the hood smokeless, the anvil silent. The stir outside came cheerily in, and when the line of voters slackened, and no ballot had been deposited for some time, and the interest of the proceedings seemed indefinitely suspended, the judges looked wistfully through the open door, and were not consoled for the dullness by their pre-eminence and responsibility and conspicuous honors. That spirit of humor, always freakishly manifested in a crowd, was quick to seize on the situation, and occasionally remarks were made outside, pointed and personal, obviously intended to be overheard within.

"Did you-uns know ez Jethro Peake war jedge o' 'lection?" demanded one tousled-headed apparition, at the famous batten shutter, of an unseen crony without.

."Never knowed he war jedge o' nuthin' 'ceptin' jedge o' whiskey," the unseen crony replied.

And with these trivial incidents were bridged the intervals when it seemed as if all the district had voted that cared to vote, and that there was naught more for the judges but to sit in stately isolation, till the loitering summer sun should dawdle down the western sky, and the hour come when it would be lawful to declare the polls closed.

After a long time, when the stir of passing feet, the sound of talking and laughter, the champing and whickering of horses, had been more than usually marked to the tantalized referees, whom the county court combined to honor, they noted that an expectant stillness fell suddenly upon the crowd. Then half a dozen men pushed into the blacksmith shop, and turned about with excitement, as if to await and watch an entrance at the door. Other men stood by without. There were half a dozen heads at the little window,

and the batten shutter was swinging. The bird had flown from her nest in the elder-bush to a bough of a dogwood-tree above, and perched there, with quivering, outspread wings, and a feverish, excited eye, and a harsh, querulous, ceaseless chirring. A ray of sunlight fell through a rift in the clapboards like some splendid glittering lance, reaching from the dusky, peaked roof to the "dirt-floor" beneath. The polished face of the anvil caught the beam and reflected it, — all else was dark and shadowy; even through the broad door the light was only a vista of deep green leafage and harmonious gray commingling tones, hardly definite enough to be called shadow, but of tender and modulating effects; and the plows left to be sharpened, and the wheels to be tired, and the bar on which the smith's tools hung, were but dimly descried. Thus stepping suddenly into this shaft of light, Jake Baintree's figure was singularly distinct, but was not instantly recognized by the judges. One of them slowly brought down the forelegs of his chair to the ground, and sat looking at him, one hand on either knee, and with a round, red, wondering face and an inquisitive eye. So long it had been since Baintree was familiarly seen in Broom-sedge — going thence a stripling, returning a man — that the certainty of his identity gradually dawning on their minds was not recognition, but inference. Who else unknown would present himself to cast his vote in their midst? Who else wore so blanched a face but the jail-bird, long shut in from the sun and the wind and all the familiars of the weather? He was very tall and slender, and in the shaft of light in which he stood, the extraordinarily sharp, clear cutting of his features was apparent. His hair was black and sleek, and lay close to his narrow head; it had a fine and thrifty look, like the coat of an animal. He seemed very meek, but for all that his gray eye was uncertain, it glittered. He looked about him with a comprehensive understanding, unlike the dawdling inattention of the mountaineers. As he offered the closely rolled scroll, his vote was

challenged by one of the judges, and he was quick and ready and self-possessed, and took the oath which Jethro Peake administered, with a steady manner, and evidently with a deliberate intention. He wished, perhaps, the crowd thought, to show that he was entitled to vote; that whatever they might say, the law held him innocent and denied him none of the rights of citizenship. Still with one hand on each fat knee, and sitting very upright, Jethro Peake, his round, red face, with a bristly, unshaven stubble about the chin, solemn with the sense of the dignity and importance of the occasion, demanded, —

“Air you-uns cit’zen o’ Tennessee?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Twenty-one?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Reside in this county?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Resided hyar six months ’fore this day?”

“Yes, sir.”

As the vote, the first he had ever cast, was accepted, he looked curiously on, while the closely rolled scroll was dropped unread into the ballot-box. Somehow he seemed unaccountably disappointed by the mysterious silence in which his choice was enveloped. He walked slowly toward the door, looking back over his shoulder at the guarded ballot-box. Suddenly he remarked in a strange, offhand manner, “I ain’t keerin’ who knows how my vote be gin. I scratched one name off’n my ticket. I know how ter write Eli Strobe.”

There were the makings of a politician in Joshua Nevins; he answered instantly from out the crowd, “I kin spare yer vote, Jake Baintree. An’ ef I can’t I’d ruther be defeated than hold office by the favor o’ a scape-gallows.”

There was a sensation in the crowd, and some “scratched tickets” were presently deposited that might have shown, if unrolled, another name written in, that was *not* Strobe.

A change ensued in the atmosphere of popular feeling. It was not definite, but Teck Jepson, with a thousand fine fibres of sensitiveness, which he had not known he possessed, became painfully aware of it, and fiercely complained to Eli Strobe.

"I 'in minded ter fling ye over the fence, Eli," he said. "Ef ye hed n't gin yerse'f ter upholdin' that thar Jake Baintree, ye would n't hev been lumped with a murderer like him."

Eli Strobe rested his slow, pompous gaze upon his friend.

"He ain't no murderer. An' ef he war, his votin' fur me don't lump me with him."

He turned his heavy-lidded, full-lashed eyes ruminatively upon the landscape, and said no more. Despite his deliberate burly dignity, however, there was a sense of trouble and perplexity about him, indefinitely perceptible, and he evidently listened heedfully when his friend and backer rejoined, —

"Waal, his votin' fur you-uns, an' tellin' it out that-a-way, will make a heap o' folks vote agin ye. I be powerful glad it never happened no sooner in the day, an' ye hev got what ye hev got. What ailed the darned idjit?"

"I reckon he 'lowed he war doin' me a favior," said Strobe, with unexpected moderation. "He wanted me an' all the folks ter know ez he war fur my 'lection. He never voted afore. An' he hev been cooped up in jail so long he don't 'pear ter sense much 'bout some things. An' yit, 'bout others he 'pears powerful sly. Pore feller!"

"Poor fool!" ejaculated Jepson, irritably. "What ails him ter set his heart — dad-burn him! — on yer 'lection?"

He grudged Jake Baintree any sentiment that he shared.

"Waal," said Eli, hesitating, "the folks down ter my house tuk some thought o' his'n whenst his trial an' imprisonment war goin' on, an' I reckon he feels thankful. Marcellly air one o' them kind ez can't rest enny ef she 'lows ennybody air hongry, or lackin' eunnywise; an' she toted

'em gyardin truck whenst they never planted, an' holped 'em sew an' weave whenst they hed no heart ter work. It 's the natur' o' Marcelly."

Jepson stood with his hands in his pockets, his brows contracting heavily over his blue eyes, that the candidate's daughter had thought so cruel and yet so deep. His hat was drawn down over his face, and the shadow of the beech-tree, circumscribed nearly to its minimum by the almost vertical sunshine, was soft upon it. He turned mechanically when others joined the group, and he listened with frowning displeasure to the suggestions of defeat that seemed somehow to be suddenly and bountifully deduced.

"I be powerful afeard I hev flung my vote away on ye, Eli," said Gideon Dake. "I never looked ter see ye hev sech a backer ez Jake Baintree," with a jeering glance. "An' some others say the same."

"An' yit," said Jepson, feeling keenly the instability of popular sentiment, "the t'other day, whenst I purvented him from gittin' baptized 'mongst the saints, a body would hev 'lowed ez haffen the church members could n't rest easy in the fold 'thout Jake Baintree 'mongst 'em. Sech a haulin' over the coals ez I got! An' now ye ain't willin' fur him ter jine ye at the polls, whar the devil's vote would n't be challenged ef he hed been livin' six months in the county."

Dake made no defense of this lack of logic on the part of the community, but fell to whittling a stick with a large clasp-knife, as he leaned against the bole of the tree.

"That ain't what makes me oneasy 'count o' Eli," put in an elderly grizzled wight with an air of pleasure in fetching cumulative disabilities into the prospect. "Eli hev been *too* spry ez constable; he hev been *too* keen ter pry inter the doin's o' folks agin the law. Now Nevins, he mought do the same, an' then agin he mought n't. He hain't been tried, — that's the main chance. Nobody's got no gredge agin him, — dunno nuthin' 'bout his doin's in office. But Eli, he hev been *too* sharp-set ter administer the law."



"Look-a-hyar," argued Jepson, "ye be a-takin' arter the man fur doin' of his jewty."

The elderly interlocutor prefaced his reply by an astute wink. "His jewty air ter *please* the people, ef he wants ter git 'lected agin!" — a golden rule for incumbents.

Jepson relapsed into moody silence, and this choice reasoner proceeded with an illustration in point: —

"Eli can't 'low sleepin' dogs ter lie. He ain't got no 'scrimination. He dunno who ter sot the law onter, nor who ter muzzle it fur. Thar's old Jer'miah Miles jes' drawed a pistol ter skeer some o' them bad boys out'n his watermillion patch, an' Eli, passin' by, druv the boys out'n the patch, an' then ups an' 'rests the old man fur kerryin' concealed weepsons. Thar's fourteen o' the Miles kinsfolks kem hyar ter vote ter-day."

If the officer had done amiss, his punishment seemed likely to be greater than he could bear. Like most people brought into propinquity with the law, Eli Strobe sought to furnish a precedent rather than a justification. "Waal," he argued, barely lifting his eyelids, "Sam Blake" — his predecessor in office — "would hev 'done the same."

"Shucks!" exclaimed the other. "I kin jes' hear Sam Blake a-hollerin' ter them boys, 'Git out'n this million patch, or I 'll be the death o' ye! I 'll jail ye 'fore night.'" Then dropping his rough voice to dulcet courtesy, "'Mister Miles, got enny o' them fine cantaloupes ter spare fur my saddlebags?' I say, arrest old Miles fur kerryin' concealed weepsons! Sam Blake would jes' hev begged a few cantaloupes, that's all, an' never seen no pistol."

Teck Jepson could ill adapt his intolerant and domineering spirit to the prospect of defeat, even when the cause was not his own. He had made to-day perhaps the greatest sacrifice to his affection of which he was capable, bending his pride to beg of the community favor for another which he could never have been brought to ask for himself. He was weary of it all, and depressed, and the continual col-

lision, in which he must restrain himself rather than constrain others, irked him. If, among the narratives upon which he loved to brood, he had ever heard of aught so modern as the romances of the Middle Ages, the idea of a knight sallying forth in search of noble adventure and deeds of prowess, whereby he might prove himself worthy of the fair, would have commended itself as cheap and easy in comparison to his devoirs to earn the gratitude of the candidate's daughter.

There are times that come to all of us when the trivial incidents of the world pall, when the presence of crowds weighs upon the spirit, when existence seems petty and sordid, and we look back to some period of solitude, rich with quiet thought or chosen and cherished labor, with a suddenly awakened sense that then we were clothed in our true identity; in that interval we verily lived rather than merely exercised the respiratory organs, and went about in the outer disguise that wears our name and is recognized of men.

Perhaps in human experience naught might more fitly foster this repulsion of the world than certain stages of a political canvass. Jepson stood with his hat in his hand, feeling foreign among them all, looking now down in the valley, and again up to the great heights; wondering subacutely if it were only yesterday that he had heard David sing to the dulcet measure of the lilting harp-strings, and watched the moody Saul listening on his couch, his dexterous hand toying with the stealthy javelin, ready to launch it at the head of the singer, — only yesterday that he had seen the high-priest's rod blossom in the tabernacle, had heard the waters gush from the rock that Moses smote. Still the solemn clouds, as then, mysteriously communed with peak and cliff; the radiant sunshine wore a rich effulgence among the lonely and far-away ranges, blue and unreal, like some fine deceit of the senses, ineffably ethereal as they withdrew into the unseen spaces. The valley, mute and peaceful, lay far below, with here and there a harvested

field — a tiny yellow square — and a flash of water ; and further, a wisp of smoke that came from an invisible chimney, the only motion in the supreme tranquillity of the scene. Here, higher up, where the massive purple range yawned with the wide deep interval called Broomsedge Cove, which seemed to be in the valley as one looked at the vast steep stretches of the mountains above, and seemed on the range when one looked down at the valley below, the men wrangled loudly, the oxen lowed ; there was a great clamor among the horses, and suddenly Teck Jepson heard his name called. He turned slowly, to see his mare's hoof in the hands of the blacksmith, who from his leaning posture looked up, and nodded to him to approach.

Clem Sanders, ejected from the forge by its conversion to the public uses, was devoting the day to the pursuit of art for art's sake. He had on his leather apron, and the sleeve of his hammer-arm was well rolled back, showing its swelling cords. He carried a hammer in his hand, and was going about examining the feet of all the horses that had been ridden to the Settlement that day. He seemed by some means to recognize his own work, and he would stoop down and take the hoof up, and tell when he had made that shoe and had shod that horse, and boast to the little group of idlers how his work lasted. His face was a study when, in catching up a hoof, he would descry the work of another smith, — his alert joy to discern defects, or dismayed solicitude to perceive craft as good as his own or superior. It was a happy moment with him now when he had one of the clay-bank mare's hoofs upon his leather apron, between his knees, as he stooped.

"One more sech shoein' ez this, Teck," he remarked oracularly, "an' yer mare won't have nare frawg ter her huff."

He dropped the foot, and snatched up another so suddenly that he nearly pulled the creature down ; Teck caught the bridle and stroked her head, for she was restive, and then stood reassuringly beside her as he looked at the groups about.

The polls were almost deserted. The crowd around the horses had grown denser. The general conversation had a wider range than the blacksmith's remarks on the hoof, and the frog, and the shoe, and the nail. Dake and a man from North Carolina, a visitor and a cousin of a neighboring farmer, were turning the interval to account in the way of a horse-trade, and about them stood a breathlessly interested coterie, all eager to witness how the negotiation should terminate; all ready to advise, to dissuade, to instill suspicion; all marking with thrills of excitement that invariable phenomenon of bargain and sale, — when the buyer is willing, the vendor is reluctant and haggles, swinging back to eager entreaties and persuasive logic when the trade seems likely to fall through. Other wrangles now and then drowned their voices, and usurped the popular interest in the horse-trade.

"Listen at Teck, now!" cried Jube Donnard, the parson's son. "Teck 'lows that thar leetle mare o' his'n, ez be sca'cely bridle-wise, kin go all the gaits. Naw, sir! Naw, sir! That mare can't pace. I know all about that mare. She don't kem of pacing stock. Daddy trot, mammy trot, colt *can't* pace!"

Jube was in his own person the most pointed contradiction of his assertion. Piety as it was expressed in Broomsedge Cove proved itself there as elsewhere no hereditary quality, nor possessed of any traits of consanguinity. In Jube, the parson's son, was filially repeated the long, lank paternal frame, the lantern jaw, the narrow head, the small excited gray eye, and the thin straight lips, one compressed upon the other. But the spirit which animated the youth was devoid of any similarity to that of the solemn ascetic religionist; and as Jube went at large in Broomsedge, it seemed a disrespect in some sort for him to look so like his father. A jovial caricature: the parson's image with a jocose swagger; the enthusiast's eye, lighted with a dancing leer or eclipsed by a flexible wink; a mouth grotesquely

solemn and frequented by all the well-worn jests and songs of Broomsedge Cove. Even the old man himself sometimes paused to look wonderingly at this junketing blade, so like, yet so unlike, his recognition of himself.

Jube stood now with his hands in his pockets, his hat on the back of his head and all askew, his solemn face intent, watching the action of the mare as Teck led her out into the open space and stood holding her bridle, while she snorted and pawed impatiently, and bowed down her head, and tossed her black mane. She was a very ordinary specimen, good-looking only because she was young, and fat, and strong, and frisky. She had had the best of care, and perhaps made a finer show than the facts warranted. Some of the galled-backed, grass-fed old cattle near her turned their heads to mark her airs, with a sort of slow and surprised disapproval in their meek and jaded eyes.

"I hev hearn that sayin' all my days, — daddy trot, mammy trot, colt *ca-a-n't* pace," the parson's son reiterated, with a long lingering twang upon the negative declaration.

"This filly kin," stoutly asseverated Teck. "She kin go all the gaits. She kin pace. An' she kin trot like a fox, an' run like a deer, an' walk like a cat on a pallet."

"I'll bet ye a dollar an' a half," said the parson's son, "ez this hyar hoss-critter o' mine kin beat her enny gait she's a mind ter travel. I dare ye put her out now, an' try her along the road ter the sulphur spring — toler'ble level all the way."

The hoss-critter was a bay, furnished with the usual complement of ribs evidently, and with a tail and mane that seemed sunburned a dull yellow, so unnatural was the color; but he picked up his feet well, he was about sixteen hands high, and according to the mountain estimate of speed he had a speedy look.

Teck had put his foot into the stirrup; there was a stir of excitement in the crowd. Half a dozen were backing the

little mare, but the sunburned nag had his friends too, and a spirited clamor arose. Upon it Eli Strobe's bass voice boomed suddenly : —

"I warn ye now, hoss-racin' an' a-bettin' on it air agin the law; an' ef ye boys undertake ter bet yer money an' race yer hosses, I'll undertake ter arrest ye. I be constable yit." He had his hands in his pockets, and he strode a few paces to and fro in the crowd, his hat pulled down over his lowering eyes, from which shot now and then a watchful surly side-glance. The young men were arranging to start together from an oak-tree at the farther end of the clearing. They gave no heed to the threat of the constable. An elderly farmer assumed the negative in the discussion : —

"Shucks, Eli, ain't I seen races run yander ter Glaston, an' ain't they got a reg'lar race-track thar?"

"That's 'cordin' ter law," said the officer. "The law's mighty partic'lar in the diff'unces it makes. Racin' at a reg'lar race-track ain't no harm, an' bettin' ain't nuther, kase it's puttin' suthin' in the State's pocket, bein' ez the race-track folks hev ter pay fur a license. But racin' on a common road an' a-bettin' demau'lizes the young men an' air agin the dignity o' the State." He still stood with his hands in his pockets, balancing himself alternately on the heels and the toes of his boots. "The State's mighty partic'lar."

The singular logic of this utterance occasioned no surprise. Unsophisticated as his auditors were, they were far too wise to reason with the law. They stood meditating on this view, chewing hard, and looking vaguely about them, hardly wondering whether the young men would balk them of their sport in deference to the constable's threat, or whether they would persist and ride a race on the common road, thus doing a damage to the dignity of the State.

"Ye jes' let 'em alone," remonstrated the old farmer. "Ye air sech a stirrer up o' strife, Eli, through tryin' ter be

sech a stickler fur the law. 'Tain't yer business ter be so tarrifyin' ter the kentry."

The horse-trade was complete, the exchange made, the boot paid, and the stranger from North Carolina had left the Settlement. Gideon Dake, satisfied with his acquisition, mounted the roan steed and trotted about for a time, showing its paces to the crowd. Presently he dismounted, and looked the animal over. Some of his friends came up, and, with the unerring perspicacity of that genus exerted upon the new purchase, their comments roused his anxiety. He turned from them in alarm, after a few minutes. "Eli," he said, in confused haste, "do ye know ennything 'bout'n a horse's eyes? I be sort'n 'feard he's moon-eyed, or suthin'. Don't his eyes look cur'ous ter you-uns?"

Strobe took hold of the headstall, and the horse, uneasy at being stared out of countenance, tossed his head hastily backward.

"I can't see the critter," said Strobe, once more pulling the animal's head down to his own shorter stature.

"He could n't be blind, or lacking eyesight, could he, Eli? Hey! Hey! Hello thar! Hev that thar North Ca'liny fox gone?" Dake called out to a man near the blacksmith shop. "He hev gone! He hev gone," in frenzied accents, "He hev gone ter — I dunno whar! — with my sound mare an' five dollars boot!" He made a pass with his hand before the eyes of the animal, who winked violently and tossed up his head. But that might have been only because he felt the wind of the motion. His unwilling owner moved back a pace, and taking his hat from his head — a large dark object — passed it quickly up and down, too far for the animal to feel the stir in the air, yet near enough to alarm or surprise him if he could see it. The constable stood looking on with interest, awaiting the result of the experiment, when a sudden thunder of galloping hoofs smote the air.

He turned to see in full progress the race he had inter-

dicted. Along the sandy slope Jepson's little mare led five others, bounding under whip and spur, her head stretched out long and straight, her tail and mane flying, her body close to the ground, the dust rising in clouds beneath her hoofs.

It was a rash thing to do, and Eli Strobe, one of the most reasonable of men, would perchance never have risked it save for the applause that greeted her; one quavering voice arose, then the rotund swelling of cheers. He could not endure to see the race run and applauded in open defiance of the law. He rushed out to meet the animal, and springing at her neck he caught the bridle, throwing his full weight upon it. The mare, frightened, reared, despite the heavy burden at her head. She pawed the air with her forefeet. Then, as she broke loose, the man fell with a terrible wrench, and away she went, with a cloud of dust skirring after her like a witches' dance.

Jepson reined up on the opposite rise, for he reached it the next moment; the other riders had not followed. He saw their horses shy away, one by one, from the prostrate figure that seemed a lifeless heap in the road. Did it stir? Or did the bystanders, rushing to it, move it in some way, seeking to aid? A bloody face was upturned; the crowd interposed, and he saw no more.

At one side of the road, unheeding the tragedy, stood the man who doubted his horse's sight, still waving his hat up and down before the creature's eyes, to discover if he would flinch.



## VII.

It was only for a short time that the wounded man lay as one dead. His consciousness gradually returned ; his eyelids fluttered and opened slowly ; he gazed about with a dazed and fluctuating attention, while he still remained, gasping and bleeding, upon the ground. Then by a mighty effort he rallied his faculties ; with the recognition of his own lapsed identity, his normal expression returned to the quivering features, in lieu of the pallid, absent, alien look they had worn. This was Eli Strobe again ; badly shaken, but still Eli Strobe. He struggled to his feet, and, tremulous and silent, he took his way down the path toward his home. A few officious friends strove to assist him as he went, and they kept pace with his tottering gait. Others lingered at the forge, looking vaguely after him, and then at Teck Jepson, who was on the crest of the hill, under the broad spread of the oak boughs, still mounted, and gazing back upon the scene. The mare, so suddenly checked in the race, was restive, and impatiently pawed and tossed her head, then reared and plunged as the rider turned back. More than once she bolted and tried to run, the recollection of the race so abruptly cut short still rousing her spirit and vibrating in her strong muscles. The curb held her to a slow gait, but her ears were laid back, giving her a vixenish look, and her full eye rolled as she came mincing sideways down the hill, ready to jump at any moment, her whole aspect oddly incongruous with the pale, anxious face of the rider.

It was he, doubtless, that first of all the crowd saw a light figure, swift and lithe, running at full speed, albeit the hill

was rugged and steep, to meet the wounded man, — now disappearing amongst the laurel, and again flying along an open, level stretch; her curling hair floating in the wind, her eyes dilated, her face pallid, her breath coming in quick gasps. She had seen it all from the porch, Jepson thought. She must know that he was not to blame. He drew a long breath of relief, and urged the mare down the hill toward the men. He was near enough to hear her words, as she dashed in amongst them.

"Leave him be," she said, with didactic composure. "I be goin' ter lead him home. I'll keer fur him."

She offered to take the arm that the blacksmith held.

"Don't ye know, Marcellly, ez I be a heap stronger 'n ye?" remonstrated Clem Sanders.

"Naw; Marcellly 'll take keer o' me. Whar's Marcellly?" piped out Eli Strobe in a weak voice. "Whar's Marcellly? Marcellly?" he reiterated, as if he clung to the familiar name like a landmark amidst some strangely wrought chaos, — "Marcellly?"

He leaned upon her arm, and he turned toward her now and then with an uncertain look in his eye. "Marcellly?" he said, with the tone of one suddenly awakened.

"Hyar me," her soft voice responded.

The blank stare in his face gave way to an evident satisfaction. He nodded once or twice, and trudged on.

Presently — once more an abrupt pause. "Marcellly?" again with a poignant uncertainty and interrogation. And again "Hyar me," in dulcet, reassuring tones.

She could even conjure a smile into her pale face and a glancing lustre into her distended eyes, while he looked unsteadily and doubtfully at her. But when he began to plod on once more, the blood dripping from the cut in his head down upon his dust-grimed clothes, muttering now and again "Marcellly?" as if this were some cabalistic phrase, hard to grasp, and when once lost never to be found again, a vague terror overspread her features and shone in her . . .

wild and excited eyes. Once or twice she turned, and looked an appealing, piteous inquiry at the men who walked beside her, a blank, dull surprise on their faces.

When Isabel, who had followed her sister more slowly because of the obstacles the sharp stones and briers furnished her bare, sunburnt feet, joined them, he stretched out his hand gropingly, and laid it on her head. "Ye air — Is'bel!" he declared, with an evident effort of recognition.

"Laws-a-massy, yes," retorted the pert maiden. "I would n't be nobody else fur nuthin'."

He kept his hand on her head as she walked beside him, albeit she remonstrated that he pulled her scalp backward; and as he went he muttered, "Marcelly — Is'bel," and again, "Marcelly — Is'bel."

It seemed a long time before they reached the bars of the fence, and went down the broad turn-row of the field, through the green and glistening Indian corn, to the doorway of the little cabin.

One might feel in these unshaded and loamy slopes the full richness of the expending spirit of the summer sun, the responsive climaxing ripeness of the herbage of the earth. So broad, so glossy, were the great leaves; so full of vigor and grace, so definite and erect, the tall and stalwart stalks! And how somnolently melodious, how charged with languorous post-meridian sentiment, was the song of the cicada that issued forth! A lizard, swift and noiseless, slipped across the path, his fine yet dull colors showing in the light. The shadows of the chestnut-tree at the gate seemed black with all this yellow glare. A cat slept on the rickety gate-post, despite the enmity of the dog of the "frequent visitor," who had spent his limited energies in barking and bounding about it, and now sat and besieged it in silent patience and with a lolling tongue. The vines were fluttering about the porch; the passage between the two rooms was dark and cool. Teck Jepson, following, watched the group dis-

appear within the door. Then he dismounted, and hitched the mare to the gate-post; the dog of the "frequent visitor" relaxed his vigilance to greet the new-comer with an amity that expressed all the compliments of the season. Jepson gave him no notice; but the mare shied violently and backed her ears as he leaped about her, and the cat on the gate-post took advantage of the opportunity, and ran up the chestnut-tree.

Jepson hesitated; he started slowly along the path amongst the luxuriant grass and weeds, where a coterie of turkeys and ducks were pecking about; then he turned back, and stood leaning with one arm upon the gate-post, his hat drawn down over a moody, anxious brow, now looking meditatively at the little house, as silent and as solemn as the vast dark mountain behind it, and again vaguely glancing toward the forge, where he could see the gossips clustering around the door, the huddled horses at the rack, the slow ruminative oxen unyoked and lying about in the clearing, and here and there a cumbrous white-covered wagon. Above were the great cliffs, beginning to show a sunset glow; and now and then might be discerned in the forest the pathway of the invisible wind in the fainter tints of the reverse side of the leaves, upturned under even this light step, and marking a narrow line amongst the dense and dark foliage, as it stole down the slopes.

Suddenly, men silent and with grave faces came out of the house. His heart gave a great throb — their faces were so like those that men bore at the little rural funerals that had hitherto formed, in his experience, the chief expression of the majesty of death, and the more terrible irrevocability of opportunity, — their manner so like the cumbrous, awkward show of respect and sympathy for the mourners. It seemed strange to him that he should note at that moment — so vagrant are our thoughts, so little held in leash by the will — how still the mountain stood, how fairly the sun

shone, how freshly blew the wind, unmindful, unmindful! The soul is the alien on the earth, and the earth heeds not the in-coming of this strange essence, nor the out-going. A strong trembling fell upon every fibre. He looked suddenly gaunt as he strained forward, whispering with pale lips, "Dead? Dead?"

Their eyes with one accord rested upon him. Clem Sanders slowly shook his head; then turned to Bassett, as if doubtful nevertheless, and desiring confirmation. Once more Jepson's dry lips framed the word "Dead?" but no sound came.

"Naw," said Bassett, "not ez ye mought say dead — but" — He paused, and shook his head.

"Naw, he ain't dead," said Dake hastily; "he may be like ter die, fur all I know. He be out'n his head, an' yit he ain't out'n his head. I never hear sech talk." Then speaking to Bassett he added, "Ye mought tell Teck a leetle quicker, knowin' ez he hev got ter answer fur it."

Jepson turned, with a flush and a flash of the eye. "Ye 'low ez I be a-keerin' fur that — the answerin' fur it! Naw, sir! It's the doin' o' sech ez be a-killin' me. I would n't hev done it! I would n't hev done it!" He struck his hands despairingly together above his head. Then his consciousness of their entertained eyes, which expressed a sort of sub-acute unrealized pleasure in the painful excitement, asserted itself, and he leaned passively against the post, silent and unresponsive when they spoke; and presently they all passed through the gate, along the turn-row and up the slope to the forge, to detail the news to the waiting crowd, and hear in turn the speculations elicited.

He stood as still as if he had turned to stone, his elbow on the post, the mare's graceful head close to the broad brim of his hat, the dog of the "frequent visitor," an animal of facile allegiance, at his heavily booted and spurred feet; he did not stir even when he saw the door open and

shut slowly, and Marcella, still pale-faced and large-eyed, emerge upon the porch. She stood, evidently preoccupied, for a moment amidst the luxuriant jack-bean blossoms, purple and white, that overran the rickety little structure. Then, although her eyes had rested on him some little time, she seemed suddenly to perceive him. He could not interpret the expression on her face. Her light figure was poised for a moment, as if she were uncertain whether she might advance or disappear. Then she came to the verge of the porch, leaning forward and lifting the blossoming tendrils that she might look through at him. She stretched forth her hand and beckoned him. His blood gave a great bound in his veins. He felt the hot color in his cheek. His heart was beating so wildly, so heavily, that he could not hear the rustle of the lush grass as his quick strides bore him across the yard, or the abrupt and frantic outcry of the frightened poultry scuttling away. There were unwonted tears in his eyes; he could have wept in glad humility for the joy of her generosity. He hastily stretched forth his hand to clasp hers which held the vine, but she withdrew it abruptly, and he only clasped the vines, warm from the touch of her hand. As he looked up at her she looked down at him, inscrutably.

“What war ye a-waitin’ thar fur?” she demanded in a low voice, and with an anxious glance toward the window close at hand.

“Ter know ef thar be ennything I kin do fur ye,” he said.

She looked away at the refulgent golden-red glow of sunset-tide, that filled all the air over the wooded valley and the mountain above, till it touched the serene and colorless east.

Then she said slowly, “Yes, — ye kin do suthin’ fur me.” Her eyes met his. “Go up ter the mounting — an’ kem back no mo’!” Her voice was intense and low. Her straight, defiant brows were knitted; her eyes, once so soft,

had a fierce glitter. "I never want ter see yer face agin whilst I live."

"Marcelly!" he faltered, amazed.

"Go up ter the mounting!" she reiterated. "An' when, mebbe, ez the time goes, ye 'low I mought be changin' my mind, remember I tuk the trouble ter call ye hyar, an' tell ye thar never war a woman ez hated a man like I hate you-uns. Some o' 'em hated one another in the Bible, did n't they? Study 'bout'n 'em. Fur none o' 'em hated like me!"

"Marcelly!" he cried again, pleadingly. "I never done it a-purpose."

She let her hands fall on either side with a gesture of indifference. "Ye mought ez well."

She knew her power. She saw his pain, and she rejoiced in the retributive pangs.

"I war all day a-tryin' ter help him in the 'lection," he protested. "I did everything I could fur him. 'T war his fault, — an' ef ye seen it ye air 'bleeged ter know it."

She looked at him with disdainful eyes. "Mought save yerse'f from the court that-a-way, mought n't ye? But ye won't hanker fur Sol'mon ter try yer case, will ye?"

Her face was suddenly smitten with a ghastly look, as she realized what that possible future for him involved for her father.

"Marcelly!" he cried, in pity for her, divining her thought.

She recovered in a moment. She bore a stanch heart within her.

"Go up ter the mounting!" She lifted her hand, and pointed through the flowers to the stern fastnesses against the sky. "An' ef I could hev it so by sayin' 'Go out'n the world,' I'd say it!"

She turned from the vines, — a light step, the flutter of a garment, the cautious closing of a door, and she was gone.

He waited for a time, believing that she would relent; she could but come back with some word of mercy, or par-

don, or cheer for him. He still held the vines aside, and looked through into the open passage of the house, fearful that she might come forth and think him gone, not seeing him here. It was strangely still; presently a rooster, bronze and red and yellow, sprang upon the puncheons of the passage, and muttering inarticulately to himself strutted back and forth, his claws ploddingly audible. And now he was gone. Upon the post of the porch, close at hand, a tree-toad began to shrill. Jepson saw the creature after a little, — a dull greenish-brown color against the weathered gray of the unpainted wood. How acute his senses were! He was conscious of noticing the curious climbing feet of the tiny reptile, as he stood. Women after a time came to the house with baskets on their arms, containing infallible domestic remedies or bundles, hoping to supply some household deficiency. They looked curiously at him; two or three made a motion as if they would speak, then desisted, and went their way. He cared nothing for his pale and agitated face, his wild, eager eyes. His pride seemed spent. He was glad they had seen him. They would tell her he waited without. And surely she would then come with some word to salve the wounds she had dealt. He would be grateful for so little. He could wait so long.

Not so long as he fancied. There came through the window the sound of an unfamiliar voice, he thought at first, strangely mouthing, and presently rising into a dolorous cry. He listened, trembling guiltily. It was Eli Strobe's voice. And when he realized this he could hear no more, — his fortitude was overtaxed. He could wait for no reward, within the sound of those tones.

He turned, strode swiftly to the gate, flung himself upon the restive mare, and the quick thud of her hoofs along the beaten ways of the turn-row announced his departure to those within. He was going up the mountain, as she had bidden him. He was going — he cared not where — to the mountains as instinctively as a bird might seek the woods.



They called to him, as he passed the forge, for news of Eli Strobe. He shook his head; he had no news to give. The votes had been counted, and the local politicians, even in this hour of stress, did not fail to communicate the fact, and one or two triumphant souls shouted to him, as he spurred away, that Eli Strobe was reëlected. He did not slacken his speed, for all the rough road, nor draw rein in fording the plunging torrent. The mare's neck was vainly downstretched toward the limpid swiftness; its very breath, the dank perfumes of its banks, indescribably refreshing at the end of the sultry day. The sun was slowly withdrawing its fervid presence. The wind rode abreast up and up the mountain. Jepson seemed to go to meet the night, for the shadows trooped from the east, and only the lengthening miles of valley and steeps behind him were pensively splendid in the rich afterglow of the prodigal day; to meet the night, heralded in the melancholy gloom under the pines, in the vague, indefinable pain with which we loose our hold on each successive day, in the sense of quiet and silence lacking in the gorgeous, albeit noiseless, pageant of sunset-tide; to meet the night, with its pensive presentiments of sorrow, its prophetic intimation of some longer space of null and dark futurity. The mare climbed the rugged ways now with a freshened will. Home, that even the animals cherish, lay at the end of the road, and she began to recognize her rider's intention thither. As she threaded the tangles of the laurel, a faint, blood-curdling sound smote her quick senses. A wolf was howling afar off in these primeval fastnesses. She snorted as she went, and trembled. A star was at the zenith. A great fir seemed to touch it with the dark, slender line of its spire. An open, rocky space, and Jepson could see the dark western mountains, all glooming, the sunset faded out save for a lingering red streak along the horizon, — a dull and dusky tint in the closing obscurity. Below, mists were a-stalking down the valley ways, spectral in the vague light that barely

made them visible. They claimed that weird and ghostly hour ; and now and then one peered out from amongst the crags hard by, and drew back aghast, it might seem, at the sight of a human being in these preëmptions of solitude, where it should meet only its own disembodied kindred. The mare shied from them with dilated eyes, and chafed at the bit, and plunged and fretted because of the momentary pause.

Jepson marked, far as it was, the lights in the depression where Broomsedge lay, — like a skein of fireflies, — and he gazed down with a pained and throbbing heart, a troublous remorse and a contradictory sense of self-exculpation, a poignant sympathy with Marcella, and, nevertheless, a pulsing, sensitive resentment. “ ’T war a accident, — nuthin’ but a accident,” he muttered to himself. And then he bit his lip, remembering her caustic jeer of utilizing this interpretation. Once more the howl of the wolf, strangely nearer than before.

“ How them critters kin travel ! ” he said.

Then even his strong hand had much ado to hold the mare, snorting and plunging, and pushing now through the laurel, now amidst the gaunt and sterile cliffs on the toilsome homeward way, whether he would or no. The rocks echoed her hoof-beats ; she seemed to the listening ear the first of a file of horse, — a phantom file, for here and there, where the road was open, and the dull light still showed its curves, it was visibly vacant, for all the measured pace that sounded between the crags. How lonely were these great rocks in the wilderness and the vast silences ! With what precipitate avidity they caught at a sound, repeating it from one to another, as if it had some strange significance, some prophecy, perchance, that they should hoard against its fulfillment. Of all the forms of inanimate nature, they alone seemed to him sentient in some sort ; and appealing from their isolation, they alone sought to communicate with creatures endowed with a motor life, through those mysteries of the elastic air, set vibrating with a word.

"Marcelly!" he cried out, with some wild desire to hear the wilderness voice her name. The whole world seemed to respond with a subdued acclaim.

"Marcelly!" the mellow tone rang from the heights above. "Marcelly!" the tender echoes of the valley replied. And now a crystalline fine vibration from the upper atmosphere, "Marcelly!" as if the magic word were spoken in the strange scenes of that lucent and glittering star.

He recovered in a moment his normal stolidity. He would have hushed, if he could, the voices he had summoned. The mare quickened her pace anew. As he emerged from the densities of the wilderness into the high vantage-ground of Bowles's clearing, the vast splendor of the thickly instarred, moonless sky was before him, — so far and foreign it was, so dark the earth lay beneath, so drear. And he hardly cared that the dull orange glow coming from the notch was the light of his hearthstone, although the young mare whickered gleefully at the sight, and went up the long, steep hill at a prancing pace, and with sundry plunges that threatened to unseat her practiced rider.

He took the saddle from her back as soon as he dismounted, — none too quickly, for she instantly rolled over upon the ground, her iron-shod feet awkwardly waving in the air. Then, as she gathered herself up with a snort of satisfaction, she set out for the barn and the water-trough with a capable air, evidently used to serving her own supper and making her own bed.

As Jepson entered the firelit room, Ben Bowles, sitting beside the hearth, his elbows on his knees, his pipe in his mouth, roused himself from a sort of lethargy of idleness, and a slow smile began to make more distinctly indented the many wrinkles around his mouth and hay-colored beard. His mild eyes shone with such pleasure as so definite a clod might be presumed to feel, but he glanced dubiously at his wife before he ventured to speak.

"Air that you-uns, Teck? Powerful glad ter see ye back hyar," he said cordially.

"I ain't company enough fur him, Teck," said Mrs. Bowles, with an assertive smile, displaying all her fine teeth.

"Laws-a-massy, jes' listen at M'ria, now!" Her husband gallantly scouted the idea, but he looked somewhat deprecatory of having laid himself liable to this interpretation.

Jepson glanced about him, heedless of both.

"Whar's the chill'n?" he demanded. "Gone ter bed?"

"Whar ye reckon?" retorted Mrs. Bowles, with a flash of her bead-like eyes. "Ye s'pose I hev made sassingers or minch-meat out'n 'em?"

"Ye air ekal ter it," her brother-in-law ruthlessly declared.

The mild Ben Bowles deserved, perhaps, a better fate than the continual futility of his efforts to preserve the peace about him. So much tact, so perfected by practice, seemed wasted here.

"Ha, ha!" He forced a laugh, affecting to interpret facetiously the retort and the counter-retort. "Nare one o' 'em hev got meat enough on thar bones ter be wuth the scrapin', 'ceptin' it air Bob. Ha, ha! Bob's fat enough."

Jepson's only rejoinder was a glance of scorn. He strode over to the shadowy corner where the children lay, and looked down at Sim's pale, unhappy face, with its marks of sullen sorrow all undisputed, even in its absent, far-away expression. Aminty's had the solemnity of sleep upon it, and her tossed and tangled hair about it. Bob's wide-open twinkling hazel eyes shut instantly in feigned slumber the moment they encountered Jepson's. The diplomatist of four snored gently.

Jepson made no comment, but turned back to the broad hearth, slowly divesting himself of his powder-horn and shot-pouch. The firelight glanced upon his full blue eyes; the fairness of his brow contrasted sharply with his sun-embrowned cheeks, and had a definite line across it where the brim of his hat had ceased to cast its shade. The spurs on

the heels of his long boots, that reached to his knee, gave out a dull metallic glitter. His brown jeans coat was begirt by a broad leather belt, and his massive, well-formed figure seemed taller than usual, since the others, seated, were fain to look up. Mrs. Bowles's eyes had a certain speculation in their bead-like brightness, as she sat silently gazing at him for a time.

Then suddenly, "Ye need n't be holdin' yer jaw, Teck. I know jes' ez well ez ef I hed seen him ez that thar Bob air a-lyin' thar broad awake, like a fox, or possum, or suthin', though he hev been tole forty times" — she lifted her voice that the youth should hear — "ez the devil will kem arter him an' ketch him ef he waits ter go ter sleep till the house be dark. I tell ye now what I'm a-goin'ter do. I'm a-goin' ter put him out'n doors, ter keep company with them t'other night rampagers, — bars, ez eat fat boys, an' painters, an' sech. An' Bob'll feel powerful lonesome out thar in the dark mountings, a-tryin' ter git away from 'em, this road an' that. His legs air short, an' he can't run fas'. An' he be so fat he mus' be toler'ble heavy ter hisself ter tote."

There was a vague stir under the quilts. Even the small stoic could but writhe a little in prophetic anguish at this prospect.

Jepson turned abruptly, strode again to the bed, caught the child by the collar of his nightgown, and the next moment Bob was sitting in his chair before the fire, looking very rotund in his straight garment, and gazing with wide, apprehensive eyes at his step-mother, expectant of the blow that always came when she was thwarted. She did not deal it now. She was constrained by the eye of the man as he stood once more on the hearth, busying himself with the strap that held his powder-horn.

"An' when enny bars, or painters, or devils, or folks take arter ye, Bob, jes' call on me, sir, an' I'll tend ter 'em." He glanced down, and nodded convincingly.

Bob looked up at the big man with a grave and plump

countenance. He gave a little sigh of relief, but he did not venture upon words. His pink toes were more rosy in the light of the fire, and now and then curled in the enjoyment of the warmth, for the night was chilly on the mountain. His great wakeful eyes dwelt on the flames. He filled his little armchair very comfortably, and his hair, standing up straight in front, gave him a quaintly grotesque look.

Ben Bowles skillfully preserved an air of unconsciousness of the clashing in the domestic circle. Mrs Bowles seemed for a moment likely to acquiesce without demur in the rule of the stronger. Then a flush rose through her clear olive skin, and overspread her blunt features. Her strong white teeth showed in a satiric smile. That added significant glitter in her small dark eyes struck Jepson's attention. As he held the powder-horn in his hand he paused, and looked down intently at her. She noted his glance. Her desire to harass was strong, but she could not restrain her caustic tongue, or she might have baffled his curiosity.

"Keep on, Teck," she said sarcastically, "keep on the way ye air a-goin'. Set pore leetle Bob up thar ter ketch his death o' cold, an' take an axe an' hack me an' Ben up, an' set the house afire, an' — *ennything*! Ye air ekal ter *ennything* arter what we hev hearn ter-day."

"Hearn what, ter-day?" he asked, marveling how the news of the disaster had reached these untrodden, secluded wilds.

"Oh, nuthin'," she said, flashing her eyes at him.

"Laws-a-massy, M'ria," Ben Bowles ventured to remonstrate, — he would fain have ignored the whole incident, — "let Teck tell us just what did happen. Mought be some mistake."

She laughed, and sneered too. "Toler'ble large-sized mistake, sartin, ter kill Eli Strobe jes' kase his darter would n't marry ye — turned ye off! Gals air choosers one time in thar lives, ennyhow." She tossed her head with a lively relish of this limited ascendancy.

Jepson was shaken with a wild fear that they had had later news from the Cove than he. Then he remembered that no one had entered or left the room since his return.

"Eli Strobe war n't dead whenst I left Brumsaidge," he replied calmly.

"Thar, now, M'ria, what did I tell ye?" expostulated Bowles.

"Ye tole me," she perversely retorted, "ez Teck war too sharp an' smart ter git inter enny sech trouble, even ef he war n't none too good fur it."

Jepson recognized the facile temporizing of Bowles in this, and he noted the quick flush on the cheek of the master of the house, attesting the veracity of his wife's speech.

Jepson did not resent it, for he had a certain scornful indulgence of the cowardly amiability of his half-brother, and a contemptuous pity for the hardship of his position in his own house. He quietly hung the powder-horn and shot-pouch upon a prong of the deer antlers that formed the rack for his gun. Then he sat down before the fire, his eyes on the blaze, his legs crossed, bringing one of his heavy boots so near Bob that the fat baby could not refrain from leaning forward, and with both chubby hands making the rowel whirl. His teeth shone, his eyes gleamed, he chuckled with glee, till, catching Mrs. Bowles's gaze, a sudden gravity settled upon his open mouth, and he leaned back in his arm-chair, affecting to rub his eyes, but now and then glancing furtively at her. The cat came and purred about him, and rubbed against his dimpled legs; then, suddenly bethinking herself, stood erect on her hind feet and put her forepaws on his knees to beg. He was not eating, but she watched for some moments with stern and vigilant eyes every movement of his chubby hands, that they should not undetected convey some unshared delicacy to his lips. Finally even feline patience was exhausted, and with an inaudible motion of mewling once or twice she sprang into the child's lap, curled up, and composed herself to slumber.

Bowles moved uneasily in his chair. The aggressive silence weighed hardly less heavily upon his spirit than the more active expressions of antagonism which he had sought to avert or annul. Now he glanced at his wife with an urgent remonstrance in his face, of which he was unaware, or he would have suppressed it in his timorous policy, and now at Teck Jepson with an air of appeal.

Presently, in desperation, he broke the pause : —

“ War ye a-axin’ jes’ now, Teck, who fotched the news hyar? I war n’t payin’ much ’tention.”

Jepson did not take his eyes from the flames. “ Naw, I did n’t ax,” he said.

Bowles subsided into silence, and his wife turned and cast a contemptuous glance upon him, which he comprehended as a rebuke that he should interfere.

The fire burned the freer and the clearer for the draught from the open door ; the circle sat well back from the hearth in the alternate red flare and white fluctuations ; the dark night looked in through the black aperture of window and door ; the awful solitude of the unpeopled mountain was close without. Sometimes a dallying white presence was visible, and one might know that a mist was skulking close at hand, clearing away again to show the glimmer of a lonely star through a dark pine bough. A tree-toad trilled ; the woods sighed, and lapsed again to soundless solitude.

Mrs. Bowles, too, chafed at the silence. Once or twice she visibly restrained herself. Then returning to her first impulse, she observed, “ Teck don’t want ter know, Ben. Them ez he don’t like he jes’ won’t see nor hear, an’ it does him mighty nigh ez well ez ef they war dead. He knows somehow ez ’t war Jake Baintree ez hev been hyar this evenin’ ” —

Jepson lifted his head. “ Jake Baintree ! ” he ejaculated, in evident surprise.

Mrs. Bowles rejoiced in her opportunity. “ Yes, sir, ’t war Jake Baintree.” Her dark bead-like eyes flashed. She smiled flexibly ; her white teeth glittered.



"What call hed he ter kem hyar?" Jepson demanded, puzzled.

"What call hed n't he?" Mrs. Bowles retorted. "He be a free man! He travels the mountings whar his will leads him, — same ez a fox or a deer. He be ekal ter them dumb sinners, ennywise, I reckon, though he ain't 'lowed ter git baptized."

She relapsed into silence, with an obvious satisfaction to have shot this arrow. She expected him to inquire further. But he only rose, looked on the rude shelf, that served as mantel-piece, for his pipe, filled it, scooped up a coal from the edge of the fire, and smoked thoughtfully, with no show of desire to hear more; and this stimulated infinitely Mrs. Bowles's intention to continue the detail of the visit. She leaned forward, her elbows on her knees, gazed smilingly into the fire, apparently meditating on these things, and once she broke out "Waal, waal!" as if in reminiscent wonder and interest.

Her husband, always alert to take an acceptable part, looked first at her, with her patent bid to be interrogated, and then at Jepson's impassive and lofty face, with its proud indifference. He reflected that Jake Baintree was in one sense his half-brother's enemy, and in another the object of his persecution, and he said nothing.

Mrs. Bowles flushed with a dull red glow, but still persistently smiled and gazed into the fire; then shaking her head slowly and gently, she presently broke forth again: —

"Waal, waal, I never hearn the beat o' Jake's talk! He 'peared plumb rej'iced over the happenings in the Cove. An' I 'lowed ter him — I said, 'I'll thanky ter remember it be my cousin — yes, sir, own blood relation — ez Teck, Jepson hev murdered, so don't git ter glorifyin' over it hyar.' An' he say, 'I can't help it. Mis' Bowles. I'm sorry fur Eli an' his darters, but 't ain't mine ter question the Lord's devices, nor what He 'lows that a day shell bring forth. The Lord suffered it,' he says, 'so Eli mus'

submit, an' his kinfolks too. But,' he says, 'the Lord hain't done nuthin' so much ter my taste fur the las' ten year! We-uns 'll see how the mate o' Daniel will look in a cage hisself,' Jake say; 'no other lion nor other wild cattle thar, but he kin cavort around an' rage fur twenty. We-uns will see how the friend o' Moses, the Lawgiver, will stand agin them lawgivers down ter the criminal court. We-uns will git a chance ter rest our ears 'bout them folks in the Bible fur one while, sure, fur the livin' will gin Teck all he kin tend ter, 'thout studyin' on them ez be dead an' gone so long they oughter be furgot, ef they ain't.' An' I ax Jake, I jes' riz up an' axed him, ef he war n't 'shamed ter talk that-a-way, whenst he purtended ter hev got religion. An' he 'lowed he hed got through with wantin' religion. Whenst the pa'son declared he would n't baptize him, it jes' kem on him like a flood o' light ez he hed ruther go ter hell 'n ter heaven along o' sech Christians ez pa'son an' Teck. An' sence that minit his soul hed troubled him no mo'."

Jepson slowly blew the smoke from between his lips; the hand that held the corn-cob pipe did not tremble. There was no suggestion of anger in his dark blue eyes, the color of the iris distinct as he gazed meditatively into the fire. The flicker of the flames fluctuated upon his regular, definite features, and he showed no consciousness of his surroundings save that he kept his former attitude rigidly, in order that Bob, leaning forward with the excited eye of achievement and the quick breath of effort, might triumphantly accomplish the feat of unbuckling and taking off the large spur. The child's posture incommoded the slumbers of Aminty's yellow cat that lay in his lap, and she held her green eyes half open that she might guard against the danger of being too much compressed as he bent over. More than once she put up her paw against the breast of his nightgown, with an admonitory claw extended; but he only peremptorily caught it and put it down, and went on with his enterprise as before.

Mrs. Bowles seemed disposed to despair and desist, as she gazed speculatively at the impassive Jepson. Her husband stirred uneasily, and then remarked non-committally, "*Some say Jake Baintree air a bad aig.*"

His wife did not often condescend to a dialogue with him alone. But this was the only prospect of covering her retreat with dignity, as she relinquished her attack on Jepson. She turned her face with a commingling animation and benignity toward her husband, and rejoined in a tone of interest, "Yes, folks say so; but what s'prised me war the cur'ous way he behaved hyar this evenin'. I wisht ye or Teck, one, hed been hyar, jes' ter see how he 'peared. He sot thar in that cheer, — 't war gittin' on toward dark, — an' his face war sharp an' clear, somehows, an' white, an' his hair so slick an' shinin', an' his looks so keen, like he war studyin' 'bout a heap he never would tell in this worl'. An' he say, 'I ain't got no mo' use fur religion, Mis' Bowles. I hev got no use fur rivers, 'ceptin' ter go swimmin' in 'em.' An' I say, 'Hev ye traded off yer soul, ez ye don't 'pear ter 'low ye hev got none ter save?' An' he say, 'Ye look out fur me at the Jedgmint Day, Mis' Bowles, an' ye'll 'low I stan' toler'ble high amongst the n'angels.' He say, 'I hev got suthin' else ter look arter now. Folks in the mountings dunno ez much ez they think they do, Mis' Bowles. I fund that out whilst I war in jail in Glaston an' larnin' so much o' town ways.' An' I say, 'It's good ye air pleased with yer smartness, Jake, fur ye air the fust one I ever hearn accuse ye o' sech.' An' I jes' uped an' set about gittin' supper, an' lef' him thar ter brag by hisself. An' whenst I looked at him, arter a minit, he hed tuk a paper out'n his pocket an' war a-purtendin' ter read. His eyes war jes' set sorter cross-eyed onter it, an' his lips a-movin' like he war a-talkin' ter hisself, an' he looked so plumb foolish ez I jes' drapped the bowl what I war stirrin' batter in, an' hollered an' laffed. An' he say, 'Ye don't b'lieve I kin read, Mis' Bowles; jes' listen, an' I'll read ye

'bout a man what got tired o' livin' in the world, an' got onter a raft on the river.' An' sure enough Jake did."

Jepson suddenly lifted his head. "What did the man do?" His eyes were alert with the interest of the incomplete suggestion, the promise of a narrative; he held his pipe in his hand; the feeblest tissue of smoke stole upward from it. He had forgotten her antagonism.

She broke into a discordant laugh. "Laws-a-massy, ye reckon I kin remember all that thar! Naw, sir. I did n't mo'n half listen, bein' all tuk up ter see Jake readin' like a preacher! An' Jake say, 'I reckon ye won't see Teck no mo', Mis' Bowles, bein' as they mus' hev 'rested him by this time. Else I would n't hev kem inter this house, it bein' sorter his'n, ez he lives hyar an' hev put his stock with yourn. An' I'll say ye air mighty well rid o' him, in my idee.' Arter that he went."

She had unburdened her mind. She had spent her quiver, — not a barbed shaft remained. She was glancing about the room, meditating upon certain arrangements to be providently made over night for the early breakfast; now and again her gaze rested on Bob, still serenely awake in his nightgown, and holding up before eyes that squinted in the eager intensity of their interest the spur which he had taken from the boot.

She was altogether unprepared for aught of moment when Jepson said slowly, "Ye hed better lay off ter milk the cow-critters sooner 'n common, ter-morrer, M'ria, kase I be goin' ter drive my stock off from hyar by daylight. I hev hed in an' about enough o' this place."

Her small eyes dilated; she changed color; her jaw dropped. Her lethargic husband was suddenly tense and alert, looking at Jepson with a dismayed deprecation, aghast at the prospect of this collapse of their partnership. Mild as he was and weak, he was man enough in this emergency to upbraid his wife.

"Thar now, M'ria!" he said, temperately, however.

It was the first rebuke he had ever given her, and he quailed as the words passed his lips. But she took no heed of them; her sense of loss was so poignant as to dull all resentment. "Why, Teck!" she exclaimed, her voice cordial with persuasive intonations, "ye goin' ter leave us — jes' kase I tole ye what that thar black-hearted Jake Baintree say 'bout our bein' well rid o' ye? I did n't go ter hurt yer feelin's. Ye ain't goin' ter leave us fur sech ez that!" She smiled at him, her eyes and her teeth glittering in the glow of the fire.

"'T ain't fur nuthin' Jake Baintree say," he disclaimed, still placidly gazing at the blaze, with none of the excitement and instability of an unconsidered resolution in his face. "I jes' be a-goin' fur good." He seemed unpliant enough to daunt persuasion or appeal.

"Laws-a-massy, Teck!" Ben Bowles exclaimed, lantern-jawed, and pallid, and disconsolate. The inflections of his voice had such dreary suggestions that Jepson glanced at him, as he sat pulling at his hay-colored beard, the deeply indented grooves and wrinkles in his face growing more definite and multiplying, his weak blue eyes appealing and forlorn. He might have seemed in terror of being left at the mercy of his wife, who sat beside him, the picture of discomfiture, and swift repentance, and anxious forecast.

The survey evidently suggested to Jepson some modification of his plans.

"I 'll leave old Spot an' her calf, bein' ez yer cow air dry, so ez 'the chill'n kin hev buttermilk an' M'ria kin churn; an'," after a moment's pause, "I 'll leave one o' my horses, so ye kin git along better puttin' in craps nex' spring. Ye kin keep 'em ez long ez ye 'll feed 'em."

"Why, Teck!" cried Mrs. Bowles, in a pained yet cordially insistent tone; she forgot what she was about to say, for there surged in upon her the recollection of his "stock," for which they had besought him to abide with them, and which benefited infinitely the housekeeping and the farming

in a thousand ways. He possessed only a few head of the commonest variety, but they seemed much when once within her grasp, and it had been as if she owned them. "Why, 'Teck!" she exclaimed once again, at a loss how to continue.

"Ye need n't say nare word," he declared. "I'm goin' by daybreak."

He knocked the ashes out of his pipe, put it in his pocket, rose, and strode out on the porch. He had not contemplated one of his long mountain jaunts, — only a turn or two in the solemn stillness of the night, to be alone with his thoughts, to be free from the presence of his fellows. This was contrary to his usual custom, and he knew that she thought him far away when he saw her through the open door rise up by the hearthstone, and heard her say impressively to the forlorn, stooping, and disquieted Ben Bowles, —

"Ye mark my words," — she lifted her arm and shook her fore-finger at him, — "Eli Strobe ain't dead mebbe, but he will be soon, an' 'Teck air aimin' aforehand ter git out'n the kentry with all he hev got; he'll flee the State, an' that ter-morrer mornin'."

Bowles listened with plaintive, hopeless, upturned face. The small Bob had become rigid with propriety of demeanor the instant she lifted her arm, and sat with his bright hazel eyes fixed expectantly and deprecatingly upon her. The man outside in the darkness watched the group for a moment, and then turned away into the black night.

## VIII.

THE events of the day were peculiarly edifying to Broom-sedge Cove. That moralizing tendency rife among rural gossips did not fail to utilize so promising a theme. One might have culled choice apothegms as to the sterility of ambition, failing oft in the very moment of seeming fruition, suggested by the fate of Eli Strobe, lying at the point of death in the flush of success. Others evolved reflections upon the overbearing spirit that would brook not even the control of the law, and certain nice points of ethics arose as to how far a man is warranted in holding his own conscience as monitor, or in subjugating his prerogative to judge of right and wrong.

Nevins still lingered amongst the group about the door of the forge, chewing a straw the while, and seeking to maintain the air of genial acceptance of defeat, and a certain indifference, which all candidates, who have come to grief, more or less successfully attempt to achieve. His face, however, betokened the relaxation of suspense, for the nervous strain that he had undergone was telling upon him now. There were vague blue circles and a flabby fullness under his eyes, which looked hot and were restless, but they held a distinct expression of resentment, and his face was covertly cynical, albeit his replies to the bluff and not altogether good-natured banter were couched in a conciliatory and still politic spirit.

"Plenty o' comp'ny, Nevins," suggested one. "Candidates fur jedge, 'torney-gineral, sher'ff, an' mo' besides mus' hev got the go-by, too, this day."

For to-day was held the general midsummer election of civil officers throughout the judicial circuit.

Another strolled up, and observed, "Hain't seen ye, Nevins, sence the woods war burnt."

"It mus' seem powerful hard," commented a Job's comforter, "ez ye could n't hev the office, sence Eli can't hold it now he hev got it."

"Leastwise, Josh," said another, with a grin, "yer hide be whole yit."

"Josh would n't keer how his hide war chipped or tore, ef it hed a constable inside o' it," chimed in an adverse elector.

The defeated candidate, thus rallied, made shift to smile, although somewhat grimly. He was evidently bent on keeping up his reputation for pluck, but he might have found it far more difficult if Eli Strobe, robust, and florid, and hilarious, had been lingering too at the voting-place, shaking hands with his supporters, receiving the congratulations of his friends, and crowing over his enemies. The aspects of defeat were sufficiently abashing and depressing, and he knew that much was spared him in that the Gorgon face of his competitor's success was withheld. Although the physician, who resided some fourteen miles distant, had not yet arrived, and no professional opinion had been pronounced, there was no doubt expressed that Eli Strobe would not live to enjoy the honors and discharge the duties of the office he had so hardly won, for by reason of the rigors of his previous incumbency the race had been extremely close. More than one of the gossips, full of gloomy forebodings, animadverted upon the lack of "spunk" in the Settlement that it had permitted Teck Jepson to ride by unmolested, and take his way up to the impenetrable fastnesses of the mountain, to issue thence when it should suit his pleasure.

"He oughter hev been arrested, — yes, sir!" said Jethro Peake, who, having concluded his duties as judge of the election, now entered upon the larger field of censor of the community in general. His round face was red with the



influence of a certain beverage innocently believed to be neither sold nor given away on election day ; his fat cheeks shook with the energy of his discourse. "An' ef I hed n't hev been inside the forge I'd hev done it ez he rid by ! Laws-a-massy ! ter ride by a blacksmith shop, whar the three jedges appinted by the county court air jes' finished a-countin' out the ballots 'cordin' ter law, — ride by in the open light o' day, an' nobody arrest him ! Ef I hed been hyar !" He shook his head threateningly, thrust his hands into his pockets, and walked a few short steps hither and thither ; manifesting now a prideful elation in his authority that had not been apparent throughout the day, and was probably "set free," chemically speaking, by the action of the whiskey.

"Then we'd hev hed another cracked head 'round hyar," observed Bassett, "'T war tryin' ter arrest Teck fur racin' ez got Eli hurt. I don't reckon nobody air goin' ter meddle with Teck ez ain't 'bleeged ter."

"I reckon Marcelly would hev liked ter hev hed Teck arrested," said Dake. "Teck 'peared skeered ter go inside o' the cabin 'count o' Marcelly. Laws-a-massy ! that gal looked like she hed two live coals fur eyes, whenst somebody spoke up his name, tellin' Eli's mother how it happened. Marcelly looked plumb like a painter I seen up ter the mounting wunst. I hed got the critter's kittens out'n a hollow tree, an' 'lowed I'd take 'em home an' see ef they'd tame an' pet. An' I looked round whilst kemin' down the mounting, an' thar war that painter crouchin' on a high rock over my head, sleek, an' strong, an' light, an' supple, sir, ready ter spring. I hed no gun, an' I jes' tuk one look at her eyes, an' I knowed that thar beastis hed grit enough ter foller me ter hell. I jes' sot them two leetle painters on a flat rock, an' I fund out what the Lord gin me feet fur. I put 'em ter right smart use fur 'bout a mile." He paused for a moment, in silent reminiscence of this speedy descent from the great steeps above. Then he re-

sumed, "I ain't thunk 'bout that thar painter in I dunno when, till Marcelly's eyes reminded me o' hern."

"Waal, now, I reckon that 'll put an e-end ter Teck Jepson a-settin' up ter Marcelly," said Clem Sanders, hopefully. He was within the forge, leaning against the elevated hearth, feeling a certain inhospitable relief that the shop had been restored to its normal uses, and the judges and the ballot-box, the clerk and the table, and all the paraphernalia of suffrage, animate and inanimate, had been removed. He was not ill-natured nor malicious, but the disaster augured demolition of his rival's hopes, and his own sprang up revived by the prospect. His heart had not been so light for many a day, — not since he had played cards gayly and victoriously with Mose Hull, all unconscious that Satan perched on the anvil behind him to overlook his hand, while the window-shutter was drawn ajar, and an uncomprehended entity looked in, solemn, dismayed, aghast. Since then the forge had been deserted after nightfall. No longer the mountain youth congregated here. No longer the cliffs echoed the hilarious songs and outbursts of rotund and rollicking laughter. No longer athwart the solemn obscurity of the brooding night were flung fluctuating shafts of red and yellow light, summoning out a trembling glimpse of the gigantic trees, or broad, lucent stretches of the river, and making the grim, immovable old crags seem to advance and retreat at the whimsies of the breathing bellows. Parson Donnard himself could not have desired the shop to be more solitary and silent than it was now since its admonished frequenters were fain to be dull and quiet about the domestic hearth.

"From all I hev hearn, she war jes' a-foolin' Jepson, ter git him ter work fur her dad in the 'lection," Nevins observed; he cast the merest suggestion of a glance at Clem Sanders as he lifted his eyes, adding, "I reckon thar war a good many in the same boat with Teck, too. I never hearn afore of a gal takin' the 'lection ter heart same ez

men folks. Ginerally gals dunno what thar kinfolks air runnin' fur, an' pays mo' 'tention ef the hen-house war blowed over in a high wind, or a mink hed throttled the fow-*els*, 'n ef thar dad air 'lected or beat. Wimmen ginerally dunno ef jedge air higher 'n sher'ff, or sher'ff 'n constable. I never hearn tell o' sech a gal ez this hyar Marcellly Strobe."

He spoke with acerbity, recognizing her as a potent and perhaps decisive adverse influence, the majority being so small.

"Marcellly dunno nuthin'," Clem Sanders remarked loyally, defending her against the imputation of a knowledge of politics. "She jes' 'lows ez her dad air the biggest man in the Newnited States. Laws-a-massy, I don't wonder Teck Jepson war afeard o' her." He strove to adjust his countenance to a proper sense of calamity, but he was a simple fellow, and frank with himself, and albeit he deplored the misfortunes and distresses of his friends, he saw his own gain, and its prospect of cheer was in his square face and his bright and narrow eyes. "I hed no sheer in it," he observed half aloud, recognizing his own state of mind, "an' I know I hope an' pray to God ez Eli won't die."

No; matters should remain as they were now, — adapted to the best interests of those most worthily concerned. Eli Strobe should recover, but with this breach between the handsome Jepson and Marcella, Clem Sanders felt that no grass should grow beneath his feet while he put his fate to the test.

"I useter be sorter 'feard o' Marcellly, but ef I war gin jes' one mo' chance I'd do some sech all-fired quick courtin' 't would 'stonish the kentry."

It was not often that Parson Donnard figured as an apologist. But in common with all the country-side, as well as Teck Jepson himself, he had mistaken the Biblical enthusiasm of the young man for religion, and had often felt moved to publicly rejoice in the gracious outpourings of the

spirit so strikingly manifested here. As he and his son stood amongst the group, he was accosted by Nevins, whose uncharacteristic causticity was sharpening with his sense of loss; for the shock of the first realization of the result had resolved itself into a continuous ache, that would always stir and thrill again so long as his memory might rouse his pride.

"This hev been a toler'ble hard day fur the saints, pa'-son," he ventured. His once pleasant smile was a politician's sneer, that did not match the obvious meaning of the words he spoke. "Seems sorter 'stonishin' fur one o' the Lord's elect ter git ter bettin', an' horse-racin', an' resistin' arrest, an' run down an' crack the skull o' the off'cer o' the law, ez kem a-bulgin' an' a-runnin' out in the road afore the horses' huffs, mad ez a bull o' Bashan, though he war a shinin' light hisself."

The thin ascetic face flushed slightly, thus attesting that the parson's blood was red and warm. But he proved equal to the emergency.

"Thar 's a lesson in it, brother," he returned fervently. "The best 'mongst us kin only lean on the Strong Arm. An' when we lose our hold, brother, ef it's only fur a minit, ah! then, brother, we fall, — saint or sinner, brother, we fall! Lean on the Strong Arm, brother, an' be upheld!"

There was a reverential attention accorded him while he spoke, his rotund voice rising into the elocutionary effects of rural exhortation, and ringing out into the quiet evening air. Silence succeeded in the group, and when presently one of the men coughed and cleared his throat, and a slight motion made itself apparent amongst them, it was like that gradual recall to mundane sentiments and stir which follows with a jarring impression after praise or united prayer.

Parson Donnard, not unmindful of effect, was not slow to take advantage of this opportunity of leaving the field with all his colors flying. And indeed there were evi-

dences of disintegration in the crowd momentarily becoming more marked. Gaps in the row of horses intimated how many had already gone ; continually the tramp of fresh departures rose on the air, and the hoof-beats sounded hollow and with cavernous echoes from the little bridge beyond the forge. Here and there in the valley, or where the winding road up the mountain-side became visible amongst the dense leafage, a great canvas-covered wagon lumbered along, catching the roseate glow of the sunset. Certain lively youths, not to be subdued by any contemplation of tragedy, spiritual, political, or material, could be heard a long way, although out of sight, whooping and hilariously shouting to one another, while all the solemn gray crags assumed a spurious note of jocose and boisterous flippancy, and called back and forth across the valley with a weird mockery. Jube, the parson's son, shambling home a half hour later, perhaps, than his father, his hands in his pockets, his hat askew, paused ever and anon to listen to this mingled fantastic outcry ; discerning familiar tones sometimes in the voices of his friends themselves, sometimes in the frenzied mimicry of the crags. He would stand motionless till the sound died away for the nonce, judging from its *bizarre* fluctuations how far the process of inebriation had gone ; then shake his head reprehensively, — for Jube was a man of sober theory, — and pursue his way, brought to a halt again only when all the peaceful valley and all the staid and rigid rocks were again declaiming in drunken mirth.

This dual possibility of standpoint enabled Jube to dwell in great amity and unity of spirit with his solemn and ascetic parents, and yet continue the cherished soul of mirth amongst the wild young mountaineers whose society was so dear to him. In one sense he devoutly believed and had formally accepted all those wise saws condemnatory of levity and threatening retribution. He could listen with an impersonal conviction to prophecies of impending wrath for

those who were merry without cause now, and who should presently gnash their teeth with ample cause.

"Yes, sir!" he would often cry out with animated confirmation, and in a voice rendered even more emphatic by a sort of chronic hoarse wheeze, when his father sat by the fire, and shook his head, and foretold vengeance already poised to alight on those who cared not to hear, and who would not repent while yet there was time.

"Dander on, sing sir, do they, play kyerds, an' da-ance! An' Satan have gyirded him up, an' air kemin' up the valley, sir, — kemin' up the valley like a black cloud in which thar be no promise o' peace; like a whurlwind ez holds no pity; like the yearthquake, when men may turn this-a-way an' that-a-way, an' find no escape!"

"Yes, sir," Jube would filially echo, his eyes distended with some mental vision of Satan expressed in these natural terrors.

The trouble with Jube was a singular lack of pliability in application. It never occurred to him to look upon himself as one of the hopeless and the possibly damned. On the contrary, there are few people in this world who take so much pleasure in it as did Jube Donnard, despite all the restrictions of his narrow circumstances. Few people can walk on their heads and hands with such joy in sheer inversion. Few people can sing so hilariously false, old songs, so oft sung, antedating, perhaps, Broomsedge Cove itself, and still find them fresh and full of delight. Few people can lose their little all at play with such cheerful equanimity. "I never see sech a comical run o' kyerds, noways," he would console himself, with a laugh at some ludicrous sequences. Few people can on occasion drink so deeply, and yet be consciously so little drunk.

If the parson suspected his son's occupations and amusements to be vain and frivolous, and unbeseeming mortality endowed with that large contract of preparing for immortality, and, with a desire to induce him to look upon him-

self as among those spiritually threatened, spoke with a secret admonitory intent, his finesse was poorly rewarded by the adaptable Jube, who would straightway respond with plastic, earnest sincerity, "Yes, sir! Yes, *sir!*"

In one sense they were a family set apart. For Mrs. Donnard, too, unconsciously held herself in some sort as one exempt. She had come to consider religion only as it affected the congregation. The promises of the Bible were for those members who heeded the parson's righteous words. Its threats and monitions were for those who yielded him not the due meed of reverence, spiritual and secular. Somehow, the unpropitious aspects of religion were predominant in Mrs. Donnard's contemplation of the congregation. Like the wives of many preachers of larger pastorates and ampler opportunities, she thought the flock got more out of the parson in many ways than they paid for. The battle of life represented for her the congregation on one side and the parson on the other, and she proved a stanch partisan, a host in herself. "They *say* so," she would sometimes observe sarcastically, when he would detail an improvement in morals or manners resolved upon amongst them, or some great awakening within his bailiwick. "Now let's see the *doin'* of it."

The parson was far more enthusiastic, eloquent, and able than his helpmeet, but it may be doubted if he were endowed with so accurate a gauge of the efficacy of the good intentions of poor human nature.

Sometimes she would merely remark, "I hev been hearin' sech ez that thar from old Squair Bynum fur fifty year. Mebbe ef the Lord grants him Methus'lah's age he may make out ter mend his ways, — leastwise some few o' 'em." Then she would burst out singing as she went about her household avocations, "The day o' jedgmint's on the way!"

In this acrimony between herself and her husband's charge, she must have experienced a great satisfaction to be so sure that all their misdeeds and shortcomings would

be so severely visited upon them, and so actively rued in fire and brimstone, — for Mrs. Donnard's faith was very complete. Somehow it had strangely discharged itself of personality. She thought no more of her own soul than if she had none to be saved. Salvation was not on her lips. Religion was an engine chiefly valuable in keeping the congregation strung up to properly perform its duties toward the parson. And yet her eye was single to what she conceived to be her duty. She zealously devoted herself to his interests, merging her identity in his; resenting his griefs, rejoicing in his pleasures, and entertaining his views. Jube was the only surviving child of a goodly number, and the unanimity of opinion which subsisted between the old couple suffered no lapse in their mutual persuasion of his perfection. The capacity for believing what one desires to believe is in itself a source of perennial pleasure, and the two took unimpeached joy and comfort in their colt, who nimbly demonstrated his capacity to pace despite the sober trot of his parents, who had never given themselves over to any such erratic gait.

As Jube came up the path to the log cabin they were sitting together on the porch, and welcomed him with sparse words, indeed, but with a solemn pleasure in him which their eyes betokened.

"Enny mo' news from the *Settlemint*, Jubal?" asked his mother. They lived a considerable distance higher on the mountain, and a bulging slope hid from them the little hamlet. So Mrs. Donnard felt at times afar off, and exhibited that avidity for the news of the day natural to a woman in the country, oppressed by the sense that, without extreme vigilance, she is in a position to be debarred a choice bit of gossip some day.

Jube had that reluctance to detail often manifested by the favored mortal who has been "to town," what he has heard having ceased to be a novelty. To be sure, Mrs. Donnard might seem to have been feasted with news to-day, and Jube



had naught to add to the narrative of the proceedings already given by his father; but she took a long time to fairly assure herself of this, and the revived reference to the subject impaired the parson's cheerfulness.

"I hev labored an' I hev labored in this field," he remarked, "an' it 'pears ter do no good."

He had both his knotted hands clasped on his stick, and rested his long chin on them.

"A set o' hard-hearted, stiff-necked half-livers!" said the parson's wife uncompromisingly.

"Fightin' an' quar'lin' whar thar ought ter be peace, — peace in the fold."

"Gineraly less peace in the fold 'n ennywhar else," affirmed his helpmeet.

"Eli Strobe, — an old-time member an' a settled married man."

"Wife been dead ten year or more," said Mrs. Donnard, domestically accurate.

"An' Teck Jepson, what actially 'peared ter be gifted with visions! Kin tell 'bout folks in the Bible till ye kin mos' see 'em a-walkin', out afore ye."

"But Teck Jepson hev a prideful walk *hissself*, — 'pears ter know all the folks air a-starin' at him, 'specially wimmin. I dunno ez I b'lieve in the savin' grace o' enny men folks ez sets up ter be better lookin' n' the angel Gabriel, ef the truth war knowed," objected the discerning Mrs. Donnard.

"Teck Jepson gone an' c'mitted murder, — laws-a-massy! I jes' feel how the members o' the church in Piomingo Cove ez be always a-laffin' an' givin' at we-uns, will crack thar heels tergether an' shout whenst they hear 'bout'n it."

"That thar smooth-faced, fat, jokified Brother 'Zekiel Johns always tuk every chance ter gin a dab at the 'Brum-saidge brethren,' ez he say it." Mrs. Donnard drawled her mimicry in good clerical fashion.

Even the placid Jube was touched by this prophecy of the

rejoicing of the opposite religious faction. He shifted his position as he sat on the step, and frowned in perplexed discomfiture, looking even more like his father with these solemn corrugations. It seemed to him at the moment worth while saving one's soul to spite the folks in Piomingo Cove.

"I'd hev 'lowed," he observed, "ez arter Satan hisself kem hyar an' sot hisself up thar in public in the forge, squat-tin' on the anvil, ez them fellers, Eli Strobe an' Teck Jepson, mought hev knowed ez bad luck would hev got inter thar fightin'. Eli jes' a-boundin' out in the road under the mare's huffs, an' Teck ridin' the off'cer o' the law down! — they knowed the devil hev been viewed in Brumsaidge wunst, ennyways, ef they did n't know 'bout his workin's sence."

The old man lifted his chin from the hands clasped upon his stick. The nostrils of his long, thin, bony nose dilated like those of a frightened horse; his eyes widened and brightened, showing a lighter tint than their usual gray.

"What workin's, son?" he demanded.

Jube looked at him in the closing dusk, and mysteriously shook his head.

Mrs. Donnard had not observed the allusion nor the look.

"Racin' an' bettin' air sinful," she declared, "an' that thar tearin'-down, good-lookin' Teck Jepson hev got mighty little religion ef he don't know it."

The old man had a sudden monition of the discipline seemly in his own family. "War n't ye one o' them a-racin', son?" he asked, although he had had the evidence of his own eyes to the fact. There was a momentary pause.

"Jes' sorter runnin' the horse-critter along the road," said the parson's son, as if defining a material difference.

The old man in a manner accepted the distinction.

"Waal, sonny, ye mus' n't do sech. 'T ain't right, an' it air agin the law."

"Yes, sir," said the dutiful Jube.

"Though ye would n't hev run nobody down," said the mother.

"Naw 'm." Jube found it very easy to coincide.

Mrs. Donnard, convinced that there was no more news from the Settlement to be gleaned, rose presently, and went in-doors to "dish up" supper. The two men, left alone upon the porch, grew more confidential.

"Jube," said the parson eagerly, lowering his voice, "what d' ye mean 'bout the devil's workin's in Brumsaidge sence?"

Jube looked, cogitating and silent, down the slope, where the great dark trees rose, dense, and heavy, and glooming. The sky was far lighter than the earth, and here only was color distinguishable, — the pallid blue tint that barely permitted to be seen the fluctuating glitter of a timorous star. Above Chilhowee, far away, the sickle of the moon was reaping the shadowy mists, gray and crimson, touched with an afterglow of the sun; a vague swath of light was left behind her keen and glistening blade. The voice of a night-hawk sounded raucous and sudden, and once more the heavy silence brooded.

"Waal, dad, I dunno ef I hev enny call ter say nuthin' 'bout it; I promised I would n't tell."

"Laws-a-massy, Jube, who tole ye?" demanded the parson, agitated.

Jube stirred uneasily. His unlucky allusion to the matter had escaped him unwittingly. He was beginning to understand that he should be urged to explain, and his tact and invention were deplorably inadequate to the emergency.

"I promised Clem Sanders I would n't tell," he said desperately.

"Waal, Jubal, I 'll gin ye ter onderstand ez this ain't no matter fur ye an' Clem Sanders ter keep ter yerse'fs," said the old man severely. "I war gin ter view the Enemy in

that thar forge, an' ef ennythin' hev kem o' sech I hev got the right ter know it."

This logic freed Jube's conscience, and absolved him, as it were, from his broken promise.

"He hev been thar agin!"

The stick fell from Parson Donnard's grasp, and rolled noisily along the puncheon floor.

"Who?" he gasped, with trembling lips and starting eyes, expectant of the answer that came suppressed —

"Satan!"

Parson Donnard sat as one petrified.

"He kem thar," said Jube, with lowered voice and many furtive glances toward those glooming woods, "one night whenst Clem did n't know nuthin' 'bout'n it, bein' at home an' asleep; but Dake, he see the forge alight an' hearn the hammers a-strikin', an' he 'lowed 't war Clem. He tole Clem arterward, an' it like ter skeered Clem ter death, kase he 'lowed mebbe 't war that thar *dead Clem Sanders*, — what ye seen lookin' through the winder at him whenst he played kyerds, — a-hammerin', with the devil a-strikin' fur him!"

"My stars!" exclaimed the trembling parson.

"Yes, sir!" said Jube, flattered by the extreme interest with which his narrative was received, its intensity being altogether unexpected. "Yes, sir, Clem 'lowed ez 't war Satan ez mus' do the strikin', an' not the smith work; kase Clem 'lows ez sech takes a heap o' 'speriunce, an' dealin' in metals air a mighty partic'lar business, an' Satan air a heap too smart ez ter 'low he kin do reg'lar smith work 'thout he hed a power o' teachin'. Strikin' air all Satan would be ekal ter round a forge, Clem say. Waal, sir, two or three nights arterward Clem hears suthin', an' looks out'n the roof-room winder; an' thar he see the forge lit up an' hearn the hand-hammer an' the sledge, clink-clank, clink-clank, jes' ez nat'ral! Clem 'lowed it made him feel powerful bad ter hev his harnt a-walkin' 'bout his own forge 'fore he air dead; he tuk it fur a sign, an' it went so ter his

heart ez he got off'n his feed fur a few days. But that night, ez he got closer an' closer ter the forge" —

"Did — did Clem go thar?" demanded the old man breathlessly.

"Yes, sir!" said Jube. He paused to look at the sky, dark and fully instarred now; all its scintillating splendors were suddenly quenched into neutral monotony, while a ghastly quiver of sheet lightning broadly fluctuated through the infinite spaces of the firmament, and over the long, lonely stretches of wood and mountain. Then it died away, leaving the constellations supreme in the night, and the dark stillness brooding in the woods.

"He got plumb up ter the winder, sir, 'cordin ter Clem," Jube continued cautiously.

"An' — an' — what did he see?" interrupted the parson.

"He stumbled an' fell right at the winder, an' they hearn the noise inside, an' in a minit it war all dark an' still in the forge, 'ceptin' that the doors they shut with a bang. Clem went in; he fund nuthin' an' nobody. A leetle fire smouldered on the h'ath, but the anvil war a-ringin' like all possessed."

Parson Donnard sat with a rigid face, but half revealed by the dull light that came from the fire within, and all unnoted by his careless son. He had possessed himself anew of his stick, and had resumed his accustomed attitude, his hands clasped upon the head of the stout cane, and his chin resting upon them. But these hands were unsteady, and now and again his lips trembled. He was secretly aware, as he gazed out into the blank darkness, that the vision he had seen was revealed in a manner merely to his spiritual sight. It was rather suggested to his own insulted moral perceptions by the future possibilities to the jocund group. In fact, he had not intended his description of it literally; he had given it in some sort as a parable, the version of the actual scene translated by an acute and anxious discernment. He had never gauged the limits of his own credu-

lity in the visions of others, and he did not at the time realize that he overstepped the bounds of verity when he construed the tableau according to the moral needs of his hearers. It was salutary that Satan should sit upon the anvil amidst that merry crew, and visibly rejoice in their wicked sports. And who knows but that he did ! The parson claimed the benefit of the doubt, and the vision of his spiritual eye was thereby improved. The idea was eminently restrictive and calculated to impress Clem Sanders that he himself, in some future reflective mood, should gaze back through the windows of memory, solemn and regretful, upon the futile wasted hours of a riotous youth. The parson's figurative language had unforeseen possibilities, and had set the "harnt" of a living man a-walking before its time. He had not concerned himself greatly with the misapprehension when it first came to his notice. He had not dreamed of strange consequences astir. Despite the natural strength of his mind, his uncultivated instinctive knowledge of human nature, his gift of rude eloquence, he was densely ignorant, saturated in superstition, and even his religion held alternating elements of terror and of bliss. He began to fear that thus unguardedly speaking a judgment was to be sent upon him. His hasty figurative words, unjustifiably used, were forthwith made true. He thought, poor soul, that he had conjured up the devil, to stalk abroad in Broomsedge Cove, where, as well he knew, the denizens were ill prepared to meet him ! Not in the guise of a ravening wolf, nor a black dog, but "bat-wise," gigantic and weird, a creature of the night, accompanied by that familiar, yet horribly unfamiliar, presentment of the blacksmith. "I hev gin Clem over. I hev los' my sheep." He groaned aloud in the misery of his reflections.

Perhaps it was the courage of desperation, the unrecognized hope that never dies till every vital spark be extinct, perhaps only the stanch and adventurous spirit of the old mountaineer, — woodsman and hunter as well as parson, —

that nerved him to say, "It air some human critter, mebbe, bent on no good." Then he presently observed, "Jube, I be goin' ter watch that thar forge this night, an' every night till I see who it air ez kems."

Jube recoiled. "Lord A'mighty, dad, *I* would n't fur nuthin'. 'Pears like ye ought n't ter resk it." Then gathering reassurance with the reflection, "Mam won't let ye, no-now."

"Thar ain't no need for her to know it." And after a pause, "I ain't a-goin' ter tell her," added the parson.

Mrs. Donnard, the best of wives, would willingly have sacrificed the whole congregation rather than let the parson risk an encounter with the enemy. Parson Donnard knew it was necessary to sedulously hold his tongue in order to be able to keep his own resolution, and thus her devotion, making his cause her own, cherishing enmities for his sake, tolerating friendships, sharing alike haps and mishaps—at last resulted in exclusion from his confidence! It was a lesson of doubtful expediency for Jube to observe the disingenuousness of the parson, as like unto other men as if he had felt no outpouring of the spirit, while he ate the good supper that she had cooked, and wore a placid and incidental countenance, and lighted his pipe after the meal was concluded, and established himself upon the porch in a definite and settled manner as if a fixture for the evening. And how, with his own practice to the contrary, should he preach to Jube, and young people generally, upon the beauty of confidence in the family relations, of the dangers of secrecy, of the necessity of setting good examples, and of amply and quickly returning the blessings that one enjoys of fine traits in others by double measure to them, pressed down and running over!

The unconscious Mrs. Donnard, almost pathetic in her unconsciousness, scoured the skillet with ashes, and now and again lifted her voice and sang a fragmentary measure, broken by leaning down and rising up, and mounting upon

chairs to place plates and sundry other table ware upon the high shelf, otherwise beyond her reach. Once the hiatus was occasioned by the parson, who put his head into the door to say he was "obligated" to go down to the Settlement to see how Eli Strobe was, when she placidly assented, and went on singing as before. It was Jube who, looking in at her cheerful industry, felt the pang of remorse, — he the good-for-naught; not the worthy parson, plodding off, feeling that she knew as much as was good for her.

Jube went too, having volunteered in an unguarded moment — repenting of it immediately afterward, but unable to extricate himself — to show his father a certain choice coigne of vantage on the mountain above, where one could easily overlook the road and the forge, and yet be at a considerable distance. "It's so steep a body mought slip spang down onto the roof, ef ye did n't scotch yerse'f with a bowlder. Git ahint one o' them bowlders, — that's the dinctum."

The moon had sunk in the unknown world behind Chilhowee. The blackness on the earth was dense and unbroken, save that here and there the flare from some cabin that they passed revealed the vague outline of the building, the dully illuminated oblong space of the open doorway, a few zigzag lines of the rail fence close at hand thus suggesting the features of the familiar scenes which the night had annulled. Above, the stars blazed in great glory and a scintillating multiplicity, but gave little appreciable light, and the parson was glad that Jube, with his younger eyes and his active step, was with him, when they began to toil up a rugged and brambly pathless ascent. The old man struggled valiantly along, — they had passed through the Settlement, the father observing to the son, by way of keeping his word to Mrs. Donnard, that they would stop and inquire for Eli Strobe upon their homeward way, if it were not then too late, — and he was beset by the terror of meeting some one of his flock here and now, where his errand



would be inexplicable. He plunged boldly among the briers; he toiled through steep stony passes; he puffed, and tugged, and made every hearty effort to swiftly betake himself out of the way of any accidental encounter. Once a sudden stir in the bushes hard by caused his heart to spring into his throat, and his quick mind to anxiously canvass some hobbling methods of explaining his position, — the next moment, the mellow clangor of a cow-bell; the creature was lying belated, perhaps, on the slope, and had moved her head, hearing their steps, and no more.

He was indefinitely perplexed and embarrassed by an odd, unrecognizable change in Jube. A sort of half-subdued hilarity grated on him, sundry smothered guffaws, gleeful allusions to previous capers, of which the parson had never heard and vaguely understood. Only now and then did Jube subside, with a returning realization of the identity of his companion. For the night air, the mountain wind, the secrecy, the excitement, the quivering expectancy of their errand, had begun to make themselves felt in Jube's blood, — a rapid current, and susceptible of considerable elation and exhilaration. The spirit of adventure was astir within him, and only at times was dashed by the remembrance that the parson was — the parson.

When they reached their objective point, Parson Donnard sank down upon a ledge of rock that his son indicated to him, his knees against a boulder lying hard by, that he might not slide down the steep incline upon the very roof of the forge. He noted how he seemed to face the great concave of the sky, how definite the western mountains stood against the starry expanse, and how distinct certain objects had become even in the pitchy blackness, now that his eyes were in some sort accustomed to it.

"Thar's the forge, right down yander under this laidge," observed Jube, with that wild gayety in his tone which bewildered the old man, who deprecated it. "Ef ye war ter lean over, dad, an' stretch out yer arm, yer hand would be

plumb over the chimbley. Laws-a-massy" — Jube rocked himself in the joy of his reminiscence — "don't I 'member how me an' some o' them t'other boys got up hyar one night, an' drapped a leetle gunpowder down into the chimbley. An' Clem say, 'Lord A'mighty what's that?' An' then I drapped a leetle mo' yit, an' Clem hollered, skeered, till suddint he smelt it, an' out he kem with a bar o' red-hot iron in his hand, a-dustin' up the mounting. 'T war a dark night, an' he jes' looked plumb like the devil hisself."

"Hesh, Jube, hesh! ye air talkin' mighty loud." The old man shrank from the sound of his voice.

"An' I seen him," continued Jube, "an' durned ef I war n't so full o' laff that I los' my balance, an' fell right down thar plumb onter the roof. Clem clomb up an' got me, he did! But the t'others hed runned off through the woods."

"Jube, jes' see ef ye can't shet up fur awhile," said the poor parson.

"Waal," remonstrated Jube, "I jes' want ter tell ye how I kep' Clem from bastin' me 'count o' that trick. Oh, ho! 't war the funniest joke on Clem; liked ter never hearn the e-end o' it, an' " —

"I don't want ter hear no joke," said Parson Donnard sternly and ill at ease; perhaps he felt a personified joke himself, perched on the beetling ledges of the mountain in the middle of the night, in imminent danger of rheumatism, and in the society of his rollicking son. It would be a gay day for the flock of Brother Ezekiel Johns, in Piomingo Cove, if his enterprise and position should be discovered, and, failing, should become ridiculous. Draw as he might on his large resources of explanation, his license of metaphor and spiritual phrasing, he could not justify the facts with the frivolous Jube in company.

"This air a solemn 'casion, an' we hev kem out, it may be, ter meet the Enemy. 'Pears ter me ye air a mighty junketin' an' jiggetty sort o' boy fur a pa'son's son, gigglin' an' jokin' all the time."

The parson spoke with acrimony ; perhaps at that moment he himself would have administered with right good will "the bastin'" that Clem had spared.

"No use ter take arter me kase the devil kems a-lopin' 'round in Brumsaidge," retorted Jube, surlily. "I hain't hed no dealin's with the devil." He spoke of the Enemy familiarly ; he was accustomed to hear so much of him. "Ef I war a-talkin', 't would n't hender him none from kemin' ; *he* ain't afeard o' *me*, I reckon."

He relapsed, however, into silence, preserving a wounded manner which was of great avail generally with his parents, and which advertised that some one had been "tromplin' on his feelin's," as he was wont to phrase it.

The night was wearing on : once the glittering dart of a falling star shot swiftly athwart the dark expanse. They could hear the pensive night sigh in its reverie. Jube now and again shifted his position, a few loose stones rolling beneath his feet. The tedium of the delay wore heavily upon him. Once as the clarion note of a cock rang out, with its response from the echoing crags, he ventured to say in a low voice, "Thar now!" as a reproach for the lateness of the hour. And more than once afterward he yawned with ostentatious fatigue. Differently, indeed, had the time been beguiled when he and his cronies awaited the propitious moment to throw gunpowder into the smith's forge fire. But then the bellows was at work, with its noisy respirations, and the anvil clamored, and the behests of secrecy were not inconsistent with sound. Now the forge in the black abyss below was as silent as the grave, — as dark. No stir save that of the torrent in the deep obscurity of its channel, its current throbbing like the pulse of the night. No light in all the world, — not even at Eli Strobe's cabin, where the watchers' candle by the bedside had burned late ; no light save the glister of the great stars.

Suddenly — the parson's hand falls with a light touch on Jube's ; a step along the road, was it? The wind — a

vagrant blast — comes a-rustling down and stirs the dust ; the dry, arid scent of it rises to their perch ; and again a step. Distinct now, a regular advancing footfall along the road, so dark, so dark under that glittering array of all the hosts of heaven. An approach, a sound — no more ! But was the echo so strong, so keen, or was the step followed closely by another ?

The parson's breath came in quick gasps through his half-parted dry lips. He trembled throughout all his gaunt frame. For the footfalls had followed the road at the base of the mountain, and had paused at the door of the forge.

All at once the old man, quivering on the ledge, started violently, and came near falling into the depths below, rescuing himself only by the strong clutch of his sinewy hands at the jagged rock on which he sat. For a sound had issued into the null silence, — a long, terrible, jarring sound. A wild, fantastic mimicry of a crowing cock, ending in a sonorous wail, profaned the solemn stillness, and was strident in all the echoes. The next moment his angry blood was throbbing in his temples. Jube's arms were still flapping in his grotesque mockery, and his gay, inadvertent laugh rang out, forgetful of all in the ecstatic opportunity, — of his father, their solemn mission, the purpose of the invaders of the forge, the spiritual enemy ; boisterously joying in the sudden exclamation of fear below and the quick retreating footfalls.

"Stop ! Stop ! Who be that down thar ?" exclaimed the parson's authoritative voice. "War ye a-wantin' ter get in the forge ?"

A momentary silence below, — seemingly a whisper ; then, "Whar's that thar rooster ? Naw ; I war jes' a-goin' ter turn roun'. I kem down hyar ter inquire arter Eli Strobe, 'lowin' they 'd watch all night, an' I would n't hev time ter-morrer ; but I see the house air dark."

"Who be ye ? What's yer name ?" asked the parson.

Again a momentary hesitation. Then, "Ain't that Pa'-son Donnard ?"

The old man writhed under the cumbrous dignity of his identity. How much easier and happier just now to be Jube, burdened with no veneration of the community to live up to! He had never tasted the bitterness of such humility as he experienced now.

"I be Pa'son Donnard," he said as sonorously as he might, "a sarvent of the Lord."

Another vague whisper. Then, aloud, "Laws-a-massy, pa'son, what be ye a-doin' of up in the mounting in the middle of the night? — nigh day, ef the truth war knowed."

"I kem out," said the parson slowly, "ter wrastle with the sperit." He did not think it needful to say in what sense.

"Yes, sir," said the voice below, with an intonation of deep respect. "I never would hev 'lowed 't war you-uns, though. I never war so skeered!"

The parson stuttered in his haste. Whatever construction might be placed upon his intentions and the hour, he would repudiate that wild vocalization of the crowing Jube's.

"I hev brung my son along; I hev got Jube up hyar."

"Edzac'ly," said Jube, with a facetiously accurate hic-cough.

"Air Jube a-wrastlin' with the sperit, too?" demanded the unknown from below; the intention of the scoffer was in his tone.

"Ye shet up," said Jube, promptly. "I know ye. I know yer voice. Ye be Jake Baintree. "I'll kem down an' wrastle with you-uns, fust thing ye know."

In the interval a sudden faint flicker of sheet lightning wavered across the dark world. Jube's eyes were young and very keen.

"Who be that thar with ye?" he cried out in a changed tone.

An interval — was it cogitation? was it consultation?

"Nobody," said Jake Baintree sturdily, — "nobody be with me."

"I 'lowed I seen somebody jes' now," urged Jube.

"Shadder, I reckon," said the voice unconcernedly.  
 "Good-night."

He moved off into the obscurity, and Jube sank down beside his father, laying an excited clutch on his arm. "Thar war another man with him, a strange man, dressed diff'ent, ez I never see afore." He listened to the retreating foot-falls. "Thar air two of 'em, — two of 'em, keeping step keerful, and walking like one man!"

The parson rose, his stiff joints creaking.

"I don't keer ef thar be forty, or a hunderd. An' ef Satan hev got a mind, he kin set on the anvil down yander or work at the forge ez a constancy 'fore I'll be fool enough agin ter kem out in the dark an' roost up on a laidge on the mounting ter spy him out, alongside o' sech a turrible, turrible, disobejient miser'ble critter ez ye hev kem ter be. They 'lowed 't war me a-crowin', — *me*, the pa'son!"

"I plumb forgot, dad," said the contrite Jube.

"An' Jake Baintree, what I refused ter baptize! This tale will go the rounds o' the kentry!"

## IX.

It was indeed before the dawn that Teck Jepson set forth on his journey. Upon the ultimate heights of the zenith midnight had poised, and had thence flitted away into those unrealized spaces whither all that has been goes at last. Constellations that he lately knew as familiars of the meridian hung low, in this unaccustomed hour, about the western horizon. Unwonted influences were astir in the brain. A sense of spiritual freshness, of bodily renewal, of aloofness from the world, possessed the hour, — a freedom from the dominant mundane spirit that had swayed the day before. The dark earth lay, as it were, uncreated in the immense voids of the night. The soul seemed nearer its nativity, fresh from the hands of the Creator. In this isolation of identity, this perfect poise, this reverent cognizance of high solemnities, it seemed that one's lips might be opened, that one might prophesy or sing some psalmodic inspiration, so replete with the sense of fine bestowals was the time.

The day was still afar off. The cattle slept as he went out to the pinfold by the light of the stars, but the patient creatures roused themselves, and came forth with quiescent obedience ; a calf bleated, running to overtake its dam, the dominant sound in the stillness, and the sheep huddled together in chilly guise as they went. There was a light presently in the windows of the house, yellow and lucent, but Jepson did not go back when once he had quitted the cabin ; the farewell to the children would be rather pain than pleasure ; there was even a pang in parting with the old dog, who persisted in following him for a time, driven

back at last with harsh words and a purposely ill-aimed stone. Jepson could not see, but he knew how the creature crouched in the darkness, with its reproachful and surprised eyes; then turning, and coweringly running back to the doorstep. The half-grown puppy watched the departure with the intense interest naturally elicited by so unusual a proceeding, then affecting to misconstrue the whole incident, and with an elaborate ignoring of old acquaintance, he barked furiously into the darkness, not desisting when a shrill interpolated yelp betokened a reproving kick from Bowles, but continuing his clamors of threatening distrust after he had sought a refuge under the house, where no interference could reach him. Far down the mountain his callow tones could be heard, as Jepson rode at the rear of the little group of cattle and sheep.

The wind was awake, inconceivably fresh, albeit hardly a leaf stirred, so light of foot it was. A fragrance like some fine elixir was distilled from the wayside flower hidden in the gloom. The morning star, so luminously still, so splendid, looked over the mountains as he journeyed with his flocks. A vague illumination was in the spaces surrounding it; one might see that this sky wore an ineffably poetic tint, did it but care to doff its sombre cloak. How massive the mountains, — how glooming and austere their summit lines, against the dark instarred skies! And suddenly a bird is moved to sing, — a note of supreme gladness, of joyous augury? For what does the night signify but that the morning is on the way? So close was Jepson to the tree whence this herald proclaimed the day that he could hear the rustle of the wings as the creature plumed them, and anon a low twittering as it settled down upon the bough for a little waiting, — a little waiting yet. And lo! the light comes, gray with vapor, and pale, and pensive, only won to flushes and to smiles when the great sun, riding hard upon the first glimmer, shows its vermilion disk, hung about with amber and violet vapors, in the gap of



the mountains, urgent to look upon the world before their utmost heights are scaled. How purple the slopes; how the pearly mists slipped down; and what long, burnished, yellow slanting rays shot athwart the world to touch Chilhowee, — nay, the far-away dim summit of Walden's Ridge, — while the vast stretches of country beneath, in a still amethystine shadow, lay motionless and waited! And here, alack, was his own old identity, full of perplexed thoughts, and troublous forecasting, and vain regrets. Here, too, as if the sun had brought it with the sight of the familiar world, was the sense of vicinage, close, imperative, not to be evaded, with the events of yesterday, the one coercive factor of to-day. Mrs. Bowles might have wondered to know the direction he took, — not, in fulfillment of her disparaging prophecy, across the line into North Carolina. Straight down the mountain he was going, — straight into Broomsedge Cove. How fast those coursers of the sun did speed, already there, betimes! Albeit so far away as the miles counted, Jepson could see from the great heights of the slopes the red gold flare in the deep gulf of the purple range, where the lucent fresh light struck upon the long-abandoned spaces usurped by the tawny-tinted growths of Broomsedge Cove. His face wore no longer that wide-eyed, uplifted, meditative look it had in the earlier plastic poetic hours. It was introspective, pondering; it bore anew the inscrutable script of experience, of emotion. Once or twice only the cattle called for his attention; with a turn of the mare on the flank of the column, and the loud remonstrant barking of his dog harassing the stragglers, they were once more jogging along the accustomed way. At length, however the foremost of the company came almost to a stand with a suppressed low of surprise, and then, insistently burly, the animals occupied the whole path, leaving a man they had met to stand and wait by the wayside. He held one palm over his eyes, for the sun came directly into his face, and gazed doubtfully at the equestrian

figure at the rear of the column. But Jepson had noted him, and the recognition became mutual as he drew rein beneath the great ledge of the rocks where Baintree stood. As he looked up at the horseman, there was so shocked a disappointment on his face that it seemed wonderful that an emotion could be so definitely expressed without words.

Jepson waited a moment for him to speak. But Baintree, still silent, gazed at him. "Ye 'lowed up yander ter Bowles's yestiddy," said Jepson at last, "ez ye be powerful glad I war arrested, — I ain't been yit, — an' ez ye 'd like ter see how I 'd look in a cage like Dan'l."

Baintree made a feint of denial. "Did Mis' Bowles 'low I said sech?" he demanded. "Waal, I jes' tole her the fust thing ez kem ter the tip o' my tongue. She 'peared so sharp set fur the news."

Jepson looked casually down at him, then away at the far blue horizon. "I 'm goin' ter Brumsaidge now, an' ef they wantar arrest me they kin an' welcome; an' though I ain't yit got the Lord so ez he sets ez much store by me ez he done by Dan'l, I ain't no mo' 'feared o' nuthin' 'n him. I be ekal ter answerin' fur all I done, an' I be more 'n willin'."

There was something splendid and imposing in his boldness, and in his stalwart pride in his courage. He turned his unflinching gaze down to meet the intelligent and crafty albeit vacillating eyes of Jake Baintree, in which there was a sort of reluctant envy, despite the rancorous enmity they intimated.

"Ye hev got ter try it fust," he said significantly, remembering the stress of his own ordeals, and that this was but the valor of prognostication. The facts would probably soon alter the outlook. He nodded his head convincingly.

"Sech ez I do," said the valorous saint, "air done afore the Lord! An' I ain't keerin' what men say ahint my back, so long ez they take powerful keerful heed o' thar words afore my face; ef they don't, I know how ter make 'em wish they hed."

Jake Baintree failed, apparently, to comprehend the spirit of this challenge. He looked absently at the red cow cropping the grass in the niches at the base of the cliff that towered above their heads, and then his restless eye followed the silver-tipped wings of a bird, flying in the sunshine, upward, upward, with open beak and a joyous matutinal cry, cleaving the mists with a glancing line of light, and seeming bound for some haven in the splendid placidity of the blue sky, so serene and so high. The dew exhaled incense. Far away a fawn bleated, where doubtless it lay with its dam in the thick coverts of the laurel. The balsam firs, all a-glitter, gave out a sense of strength and infinite freshness, and of all the finer values of respiration; in such air it was a definite joy to be endowed with the sheer capacity to breathe. As his wandering glance came back he caught Jepson's eyes upon him, and he was vaguely embarrassed for the moment. He put one foot on the blade of the spade that he had in his hand, and leaning upon the handle he looked up, his inscrutable eyes narrowing and full of close and guarded thought.

"What war ye a-layin' off ter say ter me? Jes' that?" he demanded.

"I never laid off ter say nuthin' ter you-uns," said Jepson, loftily. "Ye happen ter be in my road. I ain't keerin' ef ye onderstan' or no sech ez I am mindin' ter say an' act. I render an account ter the Lord, an' I walk afore him! I be goin' down ter Brumsaidge ter meet the days ter come. I feel ekal ter 'em, — ter what the Lord mought send."

A sudden anxiety flickered over Baintree's face; for the first time he noted the household gear, packed in a tiny wagon that was drawn by an old ox, guided only by his master's voice as he rode alongside, and the number of cattle and sheep. This was evidently a permanent removal.

"Whar be ye a-goin' ter live in the Cove?" he demanded suddenly.

"Whar do ye reckon?" retorted Jepson, resenting the

supposed curiosity impelling the question. "Ye may be sure in the fear o' the Lord, an' in the light o' his face, ef he will turn it on me."

He lifted his head with a most mundane pride and called aloud to his cattle, his robust, mellow voice echoing along the savage steep. Then, with the whole pastoral train once more in motion, he rode on down the rugged mountain ways, sitting with a proud erectness, — the lingering influence of his arrogations in the conversation, — his broad hat pushed back from his brow, his spirited face full of resolution and confidence again, and with that imaginative, meditative look once more in his eyes; for, urged by his contempt for the man from whom he had just parted, it cost him no effort to discharge his flexible mind, almost his very memory, of the conversation and of the existence of his late companion. But he could not keep his thoughts upon congenial themes. Over and again, to be sure, he reverted to the trend of his habitual meditations. It was thus, he reflected, that they of old had journeyed with their flocks under the open sky. He saw Jacob's cattle instead of his own slowly tending down the defiles; now and again he passed a bubbling spring, full of tinkling tremors of sound stealing out into the silence of this richly luxuriant land, and to him it was a "well of springing water in a desert place;" sheep they had of old, and kine, and horses, and he marveled much what a camel might be. Then suddenly, with a deep sigh, he was again striving with the pursuing pack of remorseful, sharp-fanged regrets, falling upon him anew, with a freshened capacity to tear and mangle, recruited in that short respite. With the veiled future before, that no prescient eye might even vaguely discern; with an urgent sense of justification, that nevertheless could not justify his deed to himself; with a self-effacing desire to atone for what he felt was no fault of his, as if the sacrifice could restore all as it was at this hour of yesterday, he reviewed the scene, burnt as it was into his brain, and

shrank once more in every sensitive fibre from the barbed reproaches of Marcella's soft voice, and again turned aghast from what might perchance befall Eli Strobe.

And then he vibrated to that other mood, his splendid physique rebounding from the harassments that sought to fix upon his strong nerves. His habit of robustly ignoring aught that did not jump with his humor; his imperious and independent poise; his impassivity to argument and the opinion of others; his arrogant arbitration of all matters according to his own absolute judgment, that recognized no alternative, no higher appeal, save his tyrannical interpretations of the Lord's will, all renewed their tenure, and he was open anew to the influences of the present. Here and there his receptive fancy was struck by a great cairn of stones, fragments of rock split from the crags above by the riving frosts of immemorial winters, and he was reminded afresh of the altar that Jacob piled, and of the resting-places — which surely the Lord frequented — of this journeying man of eld.

"Jacob hed powerful strange 'speriences," he broke out. "He did dream s'prisin'. An' the Lord's voice mus' hev sounded in his ears, wakin' an' sleepin', arter he once hearn it. I could n't help feelin' sorry fur Esau, though."

He mechanically noted how the golden-rod showered its yellow hoard, as his stirrup-irons struck into the thick wayside growth, how the blooming "mountain snow" brushed his mare's fine coat.

"It never did 'pear ter me so scandalous redic'lous ez Esau war hongry arter he kem from huntin'. This air a powerful rough kentry, an' the air is brief, — I fund the diff'ence out whenst I went down yander ter them valley towns, time Jake Baintree war tried. The Bible 'lowed Esau war a powerful cunning hunter, but never said nuthin' 'bout what sorter dogs he hed, — mought n't hev been trained to trail, an' time he hed pulled 'bout'n the mountings with a pack o' wuthless hounds arter deer or b'ar he

war 'bleeged ter been hongry ; but he ought n't ter hev sold his birthright fur a pot o' soup."

He shook his head reprehensively over this ancient transaction. "Esau ought n't ter hev done that," he said, as if it had happened yesterday.

The mare suddenly shied from a pallid, lightning-scathed tree showing abruptly close at hand as the path curved. He paused for a moment, but the interruption did not divert the current of his reflections. "Jacob," he said, "served seven year fur Rachel, an' 'lowed 't war like one day. He b'lieved in Rachel. The Bible 'lows she war plumb beautiful, — but I'll be bound she war n't nowhar compared ter Marcelly" — He broke off with a bitter sigh ; his face clouded ; the far-away look in his blue eyes, that was so inconsonant with the force and boldness of his features, was gone with the effect of a sudden metamorphosis, — absolutely unrecognizable. He gathered up the reins that he had suffered to lie loose on the mare's neck, and lifted his voice in a melancholy hymn, and sang aloud as he rode. Now and again the tones rose to Jake Baintree's ears, and once as Jepson emerged below the wealth of foliage into a rocky space he saw him and his flock and herd again ; the animals running at speed down the declivities, the mare cantering after, while the rider sang aloud, the sound vibrating back and forth in swinging vigor of rhythm, and with the multitudinous echoes seeming as if the whole morning were voicing the solemn measure of an anthem.

Baintree, as he leaned on his spade, his hat pulled low over his uncertain and lowering eyes, had an expression altogether at variance with his humble rustic garb, so crafty, so keen, it was. His face was lined with anxiety for a moment. Once he started impulsively after the horseman, then checked himself abruptly, "He 'll git thar 'fore I kin," he remarked. "It's down hill all the way, an' they 'll keep that gait, I reckon."

Already the song was faint ; already the echoes were

fitful. The wind was harping in the pines above his head ; he glanced up to see them gently stirring ; a great buzzard majestically circled in the blue sky ; a mist on the mountain side vanished, as the broad flare of the sun encountered its ethereal pallors, like some belated ghost that in these solitudes had braved the monitory cock-crow.

"He'll be powerful s'prised when he does get thar," he muttered, "an' that's all!" He spoke aloud, his anxious canvassing resulting in reassurance. He laughed a little, his thin lips curving. "He's a mos' survigrous fool;" he shook his head in contemplating the strength of the folly that Jepson harbored. "He ain't goin' ter sense nuthin'. He'll bound round hyar an' talk 'bout the Lord, when he air so fur from heaven ez the Lord hisself can't hear him. An' ennyhow, he'll git 'rested so soon that he won't hev much chance ter wonder an' talk. An' I'll light out ter let the folks in Brumsaidge know ez he be a-travelin' round an' a-purtendin' ter be a-goin' thar, fur mebbe he won't go ter his cabin arter all."

This cabin of Jepson's was well out of sight from the Settlement, and was in fact some miles distant. It stood on the slope of the deep trough in the mighty range which was called Broomsedge Cove, but the characteristic topography of the locality had given way, and the torrent that, long and sinuous, was a feature of the broader spaces, lay here in a chasm-like valley and wore the semblance of a lakelet in the abyss below, so completely did jutting spurs of the mountain conceal its further vagrant course. It was a wild spot, with its rocky bit of pasture, its "gyarden," its slanting fields. Above the little log cabin the great, wooded, gray, craggy steeps towered immutably ; below, the abrupt declivity slanted to the clifty banks of the simulated lake in the gorge. In certain states of the atmosphere, one standing in the wced-grown garden might think to put forth a hand and touch that purple-bronze mountain opposite. And again the neighboring heights sought a sophistry of

distance, and were blue and vague, and shimmered elusive through a fluctuating haze. The water in the chasm had too its variant guise; at times it was a burnished yellow with the emblazonment of the sun, or beneath a dull sky it glittered with a steely lustre, like some keen blade that, finely tempered, can be bent and writhen into an unwonted sinuosity; under a lunar spell it trembled and shoaled with violet tints, and glancing pearly shafts, and anon a silver gleam. On dark nights the stars registered one by one in these lucent currents, sequestered by the forest and the rocks, and held in the deep, deep heart of the mountain.

Jepson felt a sudden poignant pang when first he caught sight of the crystal depths, of the little gray cabin, of the weed-grown wastes about it, and of the mountains opposite and those that clustered round. Ah, what does an old home house! Such troops of memories, gay and grave; such palpable fancies arrayed in the guise of those that once it knew, endowed with voices that speak no more, — morning, noon, and night, these tenants flit in and out of its portals and busy themselves as of yore, despite whomsoever it shelters now, and find no lack of space. Hospitable roof-tree! He could not enter at first; he did not even have the heart to meditate on the policy of its desertion and of his return. He unsaddled his mare, and watched the cattle take their way to the old pasture and into the tumbling shanty of a barn, noting indications of their dumb recognition of the locality. He wondered if they were aware of the change, and how in their dull and half-developed reasoning processes they accounted for it. Old griefs, seared over by time and distance, began to ache again in conscious bereavement. It smote him like a blow in the face to note the weed-grown spaces of the garden, — how bravely the prince's-feathers flaunted, how the tiger-lilies flared! All of the utilitarian growths had succumbed; there might be "volunteer potatoes," perchance, under the fennel, and the broad-leafed mullein, and the long tangled crab-grass, but



naught showed of the old-time grace and plenty but the flowers that his mother had planted, still keeping tryst with the seasons as of yore.

"How she did love ennything ez hed a strong color onto it!" he thought wistfully, remembering this primitive half-realized relish of beauty of contour and of tint, and watching a row of tall hollyhocks, all their straight, shaft-like stalks studded with blossoms as they waved back and forth in the wind, by the doorstep, where she used to sit and watch them, while she listened to the deep, musical flow of the stream in the abyss below, or the blare of the wind in the pines, or the heart-felt lay of a bird singing from the orchard bough. "Waal, waal," he sighed as he lay at length amongst the clover, his hat upon the ground and his hands clasped under his head, gazing at the little gray cabin, "she hev got a better house 'n that one now, — a house not made with hands."

For all his imagination he could not see it, and so he sighed again.

It was nearing noonday; the scent of the clover was dry and warm; a bee went droning by; the shadows of a few scrubby fruit trees, by courtesy an orchard, had almost collapsed about the roots, far different from their long, slanting matutinal habit. Autumn was on the way; although its signs were scant. On the great slope behind the house a single sour-wood tree on a bold crag flaunted, a deep, rich crimson color; it contrasted sharply with its own white tassels, and with the gray of the rugged rock, with the green of the pines hard by, with the delicate, indefinable blue of that slow up-wreathing smoke.

Smoke? Whence should it come? He lifted himself upon his elbow and stared, his eyes startled and intent, as if he scarcely believed their testimony. For this vague and vagrant tissue was curling up from the old stick-and-clay chimney of the deserted house.

He did not move. He lay watching this illusion, as it

were, this guise of former days, wondering that the little cabin, gray and aged and trembling on the verge of dissolution, should lend itself to this fraud of vision, spuriously advertising itself a habitation, when he recalled how gaunt and bare it was within ; how dark were the corners, where the spiders wove their time-thickened webs ; how dilapidated a rift was in the flooring, where a puncheon had rotted and fallen through. Ah, looking at the graves in the little forlorn burying-plot among the crags, high on the slope in a square inclosure of gray palings, and remembering those who had quitted the cabin and the humble home ways forever, to lie out there in the silence of the mountains, — with the rain, and the mist, and the wind, and the snow to come and to go unheeded, while they waited the sound of the promised trump, which even the dull ear of death shall heed, — he felt how well it behooved that hearth-stone to be dark, and silent, and solitary ; how strange a freak it was that this vaporous attestation of warmth and glow should deceive his senses.

The smoke bent before the wind ; it wafted toward him.

He rose suddenly, with a changed face.

“Somebody air in thar,” he said, with mustering indignation ; “they hev got a fire, an’ they air a-burnin’ of green wood.”

The smell of the smoke from the green wood, with the pungent, aromatic suggestions of its sap, was still stronger as he stood by the door. He hesitated for a moment ; then with a muttered “I hev got manners, ef ye ain’t,” the owner of the house knocked, rousing such a sound in the cavernous stillness that his heart gave a great throb as he heard. Precipitate feet seemed to hastily plod to the door, failing somehow when reaching it, and waiting in silence, while fainter footfalls followed and paused also. It was only when he knocked once more that he realized that this was but the echo of his summons on the frail battens. There seemed no one inside, but as he tried the latch he dis-

covered, to his infinite surprise, that the door was barred within.

"A body would 'low fur sartain ez thar war folks inside," he said in doubt.

His eyes, with a certain freedom characteristic of the proprietary glance, turned with a canvassing attention now to the walls and chimney, and again to the closed batten shutter. The hollyhocks that his mother had planted — how they had grown! — rapped against it with peremptory iteration, as if insistently summoning her forth to see how they throve and rewarded her early care.

"Jes' ez ye say!" he remarked loudly, for the benefit of the supposed occupants. "Ef ye don't let me in, I'll let myself in."

Still there was no response save the striking back of the tones of his voice from the walls, seeming intrusive and strident in the utter silence.

He began to feel as if he were dreaming. He looked over his shoulder to see the scattered kine in the clover; his claybank mare standing unsaddled by the old rail fence, her bronze flanks glistening in the sun, her black mane tossing as she thrust her head over the high topmost rail, gazing with full, lustrous eyes down the slope, and snuffing with satisfaction the fresh breeze. He was awake, — very wide awake indeed, one might have thought, to see him take his pistol from the holster of the saddle on the ground and slip it into the long leg of his boot; for his faith in the efficacy of a "shootin'-iron" was hardly less pronounced than his faith in the efficacy of prayer. He walked in with a gingerly step amongst the tall, slim rods of the hollyhocks. "I hev ter be powerful partic'lar 'bout tromplin' these hyar high weeds ez mam sets sech store by," he said, repeating an old formula, familiar to him of yore, and distinguishing in the words, only after they were spoken, the sarcasm of the present and the past. Even in that urgent moment of action and of caution he sought to reflect that for her

flowered the unfading splendors of the gardens of heaven, and he had a sudden close realization of the solace she must have found in that bloomful Paradise. A vague vision of vast multiplied fields of the Chilhowee lily was before his eyes : of these white ethereal glories were the heavenly borders, he knew. He paused as he stood ; the white holly-hocks, with their garnet centres, touched his cheek. He laid his hand on the shutter, breast-high from the ground. One sudden violent wrench, and it swung open. The next instant, with the supple agility of a mountain panther, he sprang through the narrow aperture, and landed on his feet in the middle of the square, low-ceiled room. Empty, — quite empty. He stood amidst the clustering shadows, and gazed about with a dilated, excited eye. A square of yellow sunlight lay on the floor beneath the window, and in the slanting rays the motes were dancing. A new puncheon had replaced the rift in the floor ; in the chimney-place were heaps of ashes, and amidst them red coals smouldered. The fire had been providently covered to last, but the task had not been well done, or the draught was stronger than usual, the wind being favorable ; for a remnant of the green-wood log had begun to burn afresh, although only a timorous blaze now and then showed itself, flickering out in the steady column of smoke slowly tending up the chimney. There were pipes on the shelf that served as mantel, a rough pallet in the corner, and a few rude cooking utensils on a bench. As he looked about in increasing surprise, he noted a variety of fragments of rock, systematically ranged on the floor beside the walls. A strong spade and a pickaxe with its point broken off stood in the corner. With a mind void of even a speculation, he investigated the shed-room ; then ascended to the roof-room, where the window by the chimney was open to the air. It looked out above the low branches of the orchard, where the sunshine and the shadows still alternated in the old vogue known amongst the leaves since light first dawned upon the world. It

showed, too, the great dark mountains hard by, with the deeper shades amongst them that betokened ravine and chasm below the level of his eye; and there was a range afar off, appearing above their massive summits, faintly blue, known by sight only, as it were, for its name was unfamiliar, and its relative position to the other steeps was such that it could be seen only from the window of his old room. A dead tree close at hand, denuded of leaves and bark, tall and blanched to a silver tint, showed its dendritic symmetry in pallid glistening lines against the soft blue of those far slopes, and the sense of distance between the two, the leagues of sunshine, was immeasurable. The sight of the mountain, so long unseen, with the overpowering recollection of the past, had an indescribable effect upon him. His face was wistful, his nerves grew tense, his hand trembled as he leaned upon its palm on the window-sill. Another man, feeling thus, would have wished that he had not come, and would have upbraided himself, perchance, that he had been so ill content, placed as he was of late. Jepson rarely, indeed, questioned the wisdom and the policy of his own decrees. He turned himself about with a long-drawn sigh, quivering, it seemed, through the very flesh of his heart that ached physically, tramped heavily down the stairs, and without a moment's hesitation addressed himself to removing the stranger's effects; piling them all in a heap outside of the boundary fence, where the owner might come and take them or leave them, as he saw fit.

"Ef he hed kem an' axed me, whoever he be, he'd hev been welcome ter bide ez long ez he wanted ter," he observed, the sentiment of the proprietor strong within him and affronted by this lack of formality. "I hain't been outer reach noways ez I knows on. An' ef my kin be dead, *I ain't.*"

As he proceeded to put his own household effects into that perfunctory and curious disarray which the masculine mind accounts order, he glanced out of the window now

and again, thinking to see the evicted tenant returning to find his household gods thus upset, and heaped together and cast out.

So bent was he upon this that after his expeditious settlement of his household affairs he seated himself on the step of the little porch, and smoked, as he leaned, with his hands behind his head, against the post, and watched the meagre treasure with intent eyes. He did not recognize his resolution in any sense as softening, but when the unknown intruder should come back, and thus learn this pointed lesson of the absolute rights of ownership, he held in contemplation the return of the cast-out gear to the house, and an invitation to abide for a time.

As he sat there the river sang, — sang aloud to the listening, silent mountains, an archaic lay, so full of a sentiment of a vital individuality, an undying spirit, that it must have been voiced by some finer essences than are known to our dull modern density. He could hear the woods declaiming in vibrant periods, although he could translate none of these dryadic tones that came from the trees. The bees droned around his mother's flowers; a butterfly, more splendidly caparisoned than any blossom, dandered about the old neglected garden and took to wing. And as he watched, naught came down the path but the reddening sunlight, loitering along to its home in the west.

## X.

It was soon bruited abroad that Jepson had come back to Broomsedge Cove to live, and to those who declined to give credence to this new instance of his boldness — having entertained the opinion that he would skulk indefinitely amongst the hidden nooks of the mountains, continuing a reproach to the denizens of the Settlement for their failure to detain him — conclusive evidence was promptly furnished by his reappearance in his old haunts. No one sought to compensate now for the previous dereliction of the community, and he was proof against the cold shoulder and the look askance, so completely did the influence of his own individuality dwarf the opinion of the disaffected. A new view of the accident began to be entertained, and there were not a few disparaging comments, especially among the adverse political faction, on Eli Strobe's methods in office, and his own responsibility for the disaster which had befallen him. Had Jepson been a philosopher or a student of human nature, he might have found material for interesting analysis in the conduct of his ancient cronies during his absence as set forth in sundry confidences of what had been said, and thought, and threatened, and thus have sown the seeds of permanent misanthropy. He evidently gave the gossip little heed; he flouted its infinitesimal consequence. He was so validly indifferent, so serenely strong in the courage of his convictions, so arrogant in his self-esteem, that he belittled the others without even an intention of reducing their pride. Only once did the barbed shaft fail to glance off futile. "War them Pa'son Donnard's words?" he asked, a frown upon his face, as he stood in the door of the

forge and leaned against the frame, while a coterie of the gossips sat half within and half without. His eyes were dark and full of smouldering fire ; his broad hat was pushed back from his brow, which had flushed to the roots of his hair. " Did *he* 'low ez how I hed c'mitted murder ? War them his words ? "

" Jube say so," replied Clem Sanders. He was not consciously treacherous to his friend, but he possessed an unguarded tongue, and perhaps it was the hidden workings of justice that he should betray Jube's confidences, as Jube had failed to keep his secret.

Jepson remained silent a moment after the reiteration of the assertion. Then his whole aspect suddenly cleared.

" The Lord 'll jedge 'twixt him an' me. I ain't a-keerin' so long ez the Lord be on my side. I fear no man, an' the word o' none ! "

It was doubtless because of his mental breadth and freshness, his physical vigor and the elasticity appertaining to health, that his hope was so strong, and his courage so sound, and his nerves so accurately poised. But he believed this the result of piety, and he was not often gainsaid.

" Oh, shet up," Bassett urged on this occasion, being a prosaic man of this world, with a discerning eye for the foibles of others, and appreciating in some sort vast rifts between these spiritual arrogations and actual possessions. " Ye talk like ez ef ye an' the Lord war partners ! "

" Ef I hed it all ter do over agin, I reckon I would n't ride that race," pursued the moralist speculatively, " knowin' what I know now, an' how it all turned out, kase I never wanted ter hurt nobody, much less Eli Strobe. But ef I knowed no more 'n I done then, I 'd ride it agin. Tell me it 's agin the law fur me an' Jube ter race our critters 'long the road, an' yit it ain't agin the law ter race yer critters on a reg'lar race-track, kase it puts suthin' inter the State's pocket ! Thar ain't no jestic in that law, an' I won't abide by it. Naw, folkses, wrong is wrong everywhar, an'



money can't make it right. No use payin' the State fur a license ter do wrong."

There were few vaticinations now concerning the result of the disaster; the doctor had come and had shaken his head, the precise significance of which was variously interpreted, the majesty and solemnity of the gesture alone being open to no sort of question. The prophets imitated his caution, and reserved their opinion. Eli mought die, they said, and then agin he mought n't. And thus they were prepared for whatever might betide. The doctor had added to the ostensible purpose of his existence the fact of furnishing a new theme to the idle gossips who sat upon the fences, and hung about the store and the forge; he, and his big spectacles, and his bald head, and his old-fashioned buggy — a new and a wonderful vehicle in the estimation of Broomsedge — were canvassed afresh, and those who were fortunate enough to have had some necessity for his services in past times, then considered unfortunate enough, renewed their experiences in their account of the methods of his practice, the repetition of hoarded bits of his conversation, and the comparison of views as to his professional capacity. By the majority he was held to be "ekal ter raisin' the dead," but Mrs. Strobe did not coincide in that flattering opinion.

"Marcelly," said the sharp little dame, "that thar old bald-headed buzzard, — an' he looks percisely like one in them slick black store-clothes, — he knows jes' ez much 'bout doctorin' ez Watch thar, ef that."

The "frequent visitor's" dog acknowledged the mention of his name by two or three taps with his tail on the floor, as he sat in the uninclosed passage between the two rooms beside Marcella, who had dropped down on a rickety bench that stood against the wall. The girl turned upward her pale, anxious face, with a dumb despair in her eyes. She had hung on the physician's words, as if there were healing in the very sound. Mrs Strobe held her tiny figure very erect; there was color in her cheeks, and her eyes

flashed. In fact, the professional call had been in some sort distinguished as a collision between two eminent medical authorities.

"I hev been considered ekal to doctorin' Eli an' ye chil'n'," declared Mrs. Strobe, with a manner as attestive as if she were reading a diploma, "an' he tells me I need n't continue the yerb teas ez I hev been brewin'; they air 'useless,' an' whatever air 'useless' air mo' or less 'injurious.' How does he know?" she demanded, with sphinxine triumph; "he dunno *what* I put inter 'em. *Me!* ez hev fetched all ye folks through all sort'n mis'ries an' measles with my yerb-bag! An' he gimme these hyar leetle papers with powders in 'em, — nuthin' in the world but sand, I'll be bound, — an' this hyar bottle, — 'lotium,' he called it; smells loud enough ter knock a calf down! An' that's *all* it's good fur, ter de-range yer nose teetotally, till ye can't smell no mo' till kingdom come. An' 'stop them yerb teas, — no good;' an' he don't know *what's* in 'em! An' let Eli sleep, when the mo' he sleeps the foolisher he talks whenst he wakes up. Shucks! I be goin' ter doctor Eli Strobe myself! I hev tuk him along through a many a tight fix."

The girl sighed with relief and renewing hope, and pushed back the tangled heavy curling hair from her brow.

"Don't ye be oneasy, chile," said the sturdy little dame. "I 'lowed ter Teck Jepson jes' yestiddy, I say, 'Eli Strobe's my son. But what through his bein' the dad o' Marcellly an' Is'bel, an' the constable o' Brumsaidge, an' the patient o' the doctor, a body mought see they did n't 'low me ter hev *much* sheer in him. But I be his mother, an' ef I hev got *enny* rights I reckon it air ter dose him ter my own taste.' 'An' Teck say, 'Ef I war sick, Mis' Strobe, I'd a sight ruther hev you-uns ter look arter me 'n enny doctor-man I ever see.' Teck spoke right up."

"Teck Jepson!" cried the girl, knitting her straight black eyebrows, "hev he hed the insurance ter kem hyar agin?"

"Ye air a idjit, Marcelly; 'course he kem ter inquire arter Eli. He ain't studyin' 'bout you-uns; but that's jes' like a gal, — vainglorious till she 'lows the man air a-contrivin' an' thinkin' 'bout'n her all the time. Shucks, chile; wait till ye git ez old ez I be, an' ye'll find out it air the wimmin ez hev ter do the thinkin' an' contrivin' ter please the men, an' *then* can't keep up with 'em more 'n half the time."

"I don't want ter please 'em," said Marcella, with a curve of her delicate lips, and lifting her head to its habitual airy pose.

"Kase ye feel so mighty sure ye air goin' ter 'thout tryin'," retorted the discerning grandmother. "Let somebody tell ye now ez ye air downright ugly, an' ef they could make ye b'lieve it, ye'd a sight rather hear ye hed los' yer soul's salvation!"

She began to turn anew the papers in her hand. "'Quit them yerb teas,'" she quoted with a cantankerous accent, as she fumbled with the tiny wrappers, mimicking the physician's ill-judged scorn. She was letting the powders fly out in the wind. "'Gin these powders, one every hour.' He lef' his watch, sir, so ez ter tell the time o' day; an' it air in yander now, a-goin' on like suthin' live. 'Gin him these powders,' — I'll gin him some yerb tea, an' tell the doctor the powders done him a power o' good, when he kems agin. Ye Watch," she called out to the dog, who when a few flakes of the medicine fell upon the floor sprang up with an expectant hunger and a glistening greedy eye, as if he had not had a morsel of food for a week, "ef ye lap that up, it'll tangle yer liver an' gizzard up so ye'll *never* git 'em straight agin." Completing the destruction of the powders, she shook the bottle, looking at it intently. "Mought be some use." The seeming admission was as to the value of the glass vial, by no means the "lotium."

That afternoon she demonstrated her incontestable claim, however, to some knowledge of hygiene by a mandate that

Marcella, and not Isabel, should go after the cows ; and as the girl reluctantly left the invalid's bedside, Mrs. Strobe followed her out with axioms and boasts, for she had grown exceedingly prideful and exalted anew in her own opinion since she had observed the methods of the physician. " Ye oughter git some air an' light, Marcella ; ye look like the las' o' pea-time, — an' old ! some similar ter Noah's grandmother, ef the good 'oman hed lasted this long. Ef ye keep on lookin' like that, even Clem Sanders won't admire ye ; an' I think he air the kind o' boy ez hev got mighty little 'scrimination in gal-folks, — all of 'em pritty ter Clem, I'll be bound. Ye go out an' git them cows hyar. I don't want Is'bel ter grow no taller till she makes out ter git a little wider. She looks now like she war a-travelin' on stilts, bein' so long-legged. Naw, Is'bel hed better set still, an' try ter fatten. Our folks war always knowed ter be a set o' well-favored wimmin, an' I don't want ye an' Is'bel ter gin the lie ter that report. Ez ter the 'men o' the fambly, they war ugly enough ter skeer the bars in the woods ; but, honey, *they never* knowed it, an' ez they war so powerful pleased with thar own beauty, sech ez they hed, it holped ter keep 'em satisfied, leastwise ez satisfied ez they war able ter be. Ye go 'long, an' see ef ye can't find yer own looks somewhar out yander in the wind an' 'mongst the rocks. I'll be bound ye'll kem up with 'em tangled in the briers."

If it were the radiance of the splendid and perfect day that was Marcella's inalienable possession, the tint of the wild rose for her lips and her infrequent flush, the lucent shining of deep pure waters reproduced in her eyes, she seemed to have renewed all these invaluable gifts when she chanced to cross the little foot-bridge over the torrent that ran through Broomsedge Cove. The cows that she drove were fording the stream, standing flank-deep in the swirling current ; the waters were a dark brownish-green tint, of a crystalline clearness, and swift and songful ; the dense laurel

leaned over the banks; shadowy pines rose high above; here and there a cliff towered, and a great fir stood, with wide-spreading glooms in its branches, at one end of the frail, little bridge. Above, one could see but a mere strip of the blue sky; farther up the stream, as the banks curved, the tumultuous rapids caught a sunbeam on their flashing foam, and a barren old crag on the opposite bank wore a tender roseate flush to see the sun set. But here in these shady precincts was neither beam nor pink radiance; the red cardinal flower blooming by the water's edge had but a sombre splendor, the ripples and the wide circles that the movement of the kine sent to the margin were dark lustrous lines, and the foam dashing over the half-submerged brown rocks wore a more absolute and pallid white for the dull green and neutral tints of its vicinage.

The girl had been leaning her crossed arms upon the hand-rail of the bridge, and looking absently down at the turmoils of the current. She could see her own image in the clearer space, her sunbonnet falling upon the shoulders of her blue dress, her curling brown hair floating free; her fair face, with its brilliant eyes and definite dark brows and grave lips, seemed all the more distinct, somehow, for the red flare of a kerchief knotted about her throat, the ends hanging down almost to her slender waist. The chant of the river filled the air; the wind was sonorously astir in the trees; now and again one of the cows, drinking no longer, but standing still, enjoying the freshness of the dusky place, lowed, and the echoes responded. Thus Marcella did not hear an approach; she saw the reflection as Teck Jepson came along the little bridge where she stood, and the timbers elastically vibrated with each consecutive step. She scarcely credited the testimony of the image in the water. She lifted her head with a sudden startled look, putting back with one hand her heavy hair, and staring frowningly at him. She did not speak; she still leaned one arm upon the hand-rail.

"Howdy," Jepson observed calmly. "How 's Eli?"

If she could have escaped him she would not have deigned him a word, but she could not pass him upon the narrow space of the two hewn logs that served as bridge; below was the deep water, and she would not retreat. "I won't take the back track fur nobody," she said to herself, with her head high.

He had evidently been hunting; his mare, with a newly killed deer laid athwart the saddle, awaited him on the bank; he had thrown the reins over a bough of a cucumber-tree. As Marcella glanced thither, she noted that the cones on the green branches were glowing red, and that the coat of the deer, whose antlers and ghastly cut throat were visible as the creature lay on its side, had already changed from the fulvous tints of summer to the duller gray of autumn; the season was surely waning. Her eyes came back reluctantly to Jepson. He was booted and spurred; he carried his rifle; his hunting-knife was in his broad leather belt; he wore his shot-pouch and powder-horn strapped over the shoulder of his brown jeans coat; his broad wool hat was pushed far back from his face, and once more she noticed how calm and reposeful his expression was. Somehow it added rancor to her anger, for she felt it hard that he should be at ease while she was so racked with care.

"I dunno ez I hev enny call ter tell ye how he be. Ef it had n't been fur you-uns, he'd be powerful hearty an' well. Mighty few folks in the Cove ez survigrous ez he'd be, ef 't war n't fur you-uns."

He looked reproachfully at her. Then with an effort to mollify her, "Ye air mighty hard on me, Marcella."

She held her head up, relishing her cruelty. "Not half ez hard ez ye desurve," she declared.

He sighed heavily as he looked at her, and she smiled, with satire glancing in her eyes.

"I ain't half ez hard ez ye desurve, or ez I would like ter be," she reiterated. "I dunno how ter be no harder, or I would."

"Marcelly!" he remonstrated. "'T war n't my fault. Ye 'low I would hev done sech a purpose? Even s'pose I war jes' mean, look how it hev turned out fur me. I hed 'lowed, ef it hed n't happened, ez ye an' me mought marry some day. An' now ye can't abide me."

"I never could!" she retorted.

He flushed with a sudden sense of mortification, but his store of patience was very great in this emergency, — he, who could usually command so little. "Ye did n't useter show it so plain," he argued.

"Why," she protested with a cavalier air, "I ain't on-dertakin' ter drive off all the folks ez kem constant to the cabin. How 'd I know ye war n't kem in' ter see *Is'bel*, or — *granny*?"

This mocking flier wounded him, — so sensitive he was where she was concerned, — and he was reminded afresh of the number of sturdy worshipers at that shrine, and his jealousy sprang up anew. He stood staring silently at her, noting again how beautiful she was, canvassing secretly the claims of the others; but however his hope might belittle their chances, they all were more fortunate than he in having at least the toleration of the fair prize. She resented that long, reflective gaze, and broke forth suddenly.

"Air ye obligated ennywise ter stan' in the middle o' this narrer bredge all evenin'?" she demanded, with a flushing cheek and a flashing eye. "An' why n't ye stay up in the mounting an' kem down no mo', ez I bid ye?"

There was something passing all bounds of endurance in her patent scorn and the intensity of her anger. He realized the extent of her affliction, and his love, albeit quickly grown, was great. But his pride was an indomitable essence, and it showed in his manner as he drew himself tensely erect. "I don't hold myself bound ter mind yer bid," he said slowly. "I hev been in love with ye ever sence I fust set eyes on ye, but I ain't sech ez Samson or some o' the t'others, ez war fairly owned, body an' soul, by

some woman or other. I foller my own will, an' it hev led me down ter my own house in Brumsaidge Cove, an' I go up ter the mounting no mo'. I foller my own will, an' it leads me whar the voice o' the Sperit summons."

His eyes dilated and his color flared; his serious, half-frowning gaze was fixed upon her, but he hardly saw her as he made this valiant declaration of independence. There was dignity as well as strength in his pose and his manner, and the temerity of his resolution to be no slave to his love.

His revolt, if so it might be interpreted, against the supreme power which she wielded overwhelmed her in some sort. She looked at him with a self-forgetfulness, a sort of impersonal interest, for a moment.

"Yes, sir; thar I mean ter live an' die,—in Brumsaidge," he pursued. "An' enny woman ez tells me ter go thar or kem hyar—'thout it air ter do some favior—mought ez well save her breath. I be man enough, I reckon, ter know my mind an' do it,—leastwise I'll try."

Once more he paused. The mare was straining at the reins that hampered her freedom, and he heard the rustling of the bough to which she was hitched. He gave a hasty, mechanical glance over his shoulder to make sure that she and the burden, the killed buck, were where they should be. The stirrups, swinging back and forth, touched the antlers once and again with a sharp sound; a frog was croaking on an oozy green log by the bank; Jepson's old deerhound, an animal whose capacity for speed showed in every line of its supple body, had followed him deftly along the bridge and stood beside him, looking up with intelligent eyes, and once or twice furtively licking his boot. As Jepson turned back, he saw Marcella's face without that expression of anger and reproach; she was for the moment absolved from her intention of hatred. He noted the lurking sadness, the haunting fear, the wistfulness that is always the sequence and attestation of some predominant emotion. She looked so tender, so young, so grievously wounded.



"Oh, Marcelly," he cried, "I never meant ter harm Eli! I would n't hev hurt him fur nuthin'. I would n't keer what the law would do ter me fur it, ef only ye'd b'lieve I never done it a-purpose. Ef only ye'd say that, I'd go ter jail fur the rest o' my life rejoicin'."

The moment he recurred to the suppliant tone her sense of power returned. The implacable, imperative look was again in her face, coming with a rush of color, as if the blood-red glow were the inherent tint of pride.

"Ye air about ez fur from jail ez enny man on this yearth, an' ye air goin' ter stay so, ef ye kin hev yer way. I don't keer what ye meant or did n't mean ter do. I keer fur what ye done! An' ef ye foller yer will an' the voice o' the Sperit, ez ye 'lows leads ye, ye'll be mighty clar from git-tin' punished, whether ye live in Brumsaidge or the moun-ting. I don't keer whar ye live 'n what ye do now." She had ceased to lean on the hand-rail, and her image had vanished from the water; she stood erect and slender before him, the red kerchief carelessly knotted about her throat, her bonnet hanging on her shoulders, her long, half curling, and thickly waving hair almost hiding it. "I'd be obleeged ter ye ef ye'd git out'n my road. I don't wanter drown myself in that water, an' it seems I'll hev ter ef I try ter pass ye."

He said no more and slowly withdrew, busying himself about his saddle-girth. He glanced, wounded and reproachful, at Marcella as she went by, following the cows, but she gave him no word, and was presently lost in the woods.

After she had reached home, she saw him going down the road to the Settlement. "Bold ez brass," she commented, looking at him from the porch. "I wisht he'd git arrested, somehow."

She marveled as to his mission, but it excited scant attention in the Cove, where his frequent presence since his return from the mountains had become familiar. He took his way toward the store, which combined commercial and

postal functions, — a little frame building without a porch, and with only one room. In some seizure of unprecedented energy, the storekeeper had undertaken to whitewash it; his industry had compassed the surface of its front, and then collapsed finally, and thus it had subsequently stood, its dark, weather-stained sides and back in sharp contrast with the white front of the building. His proceedings had been characteristically considered by the mountaineers to be in fault in the first instance, for the effort to furbish up the appearance of the store was esteemed a reprehensible aping of town ways and views. No one animadverted upon his indolence in failing to carry out his design. A mountaineer, whose name is lost to tradition, one day observed that the white-fronted building, as it sat on the slope of the hill, always looked to him like a white-faced bull; and thereafter the owner went by the name of "White-Face Hobbs." He was upon the doorstep now, — a long, lank fellow, whose lowly posture accented the extreme length of his legs; and as he sat with his knees as high as his chin, the attitude was vaguely suggestive of a grasshopper. He had a cadaverous face, the color of parchment, and he entertained pessimistic views of the intentions, morals, and manners of all the young men in the Cove.

"A pack o' fresky cusses kem in hyar an' play thar jokes off, an' dust one 'nother with flour, an' turn over the sorghum or the sugar, an' folks tell me they war funnin'. I'll git ter funnin', fust thing they know! I don't think nuthin' in this world air ez funny ez a big hickory stick, an' I kin use it so ez ter make *me* laugh mightily, though some folks mought be too sober-sided, time I war done with it."

On a rickety chair, tilted against the white-faced wall, sat a young man, wearing a suit of cheap but spruce and showy store-clothes. He had a broad, freckled face, and sandy hair. He was a visitor here, Hobbs being his uncle, and Jepson's intention to address him was so evident, as he came up the slope leading his mare, which looked

reluctant and long-necked, still burdened with the deer, that the storekeeper, fearing a commercial opportunity might elude him while the young men talked, struck in, forestalling Jepson's remark.

"Wanter sell yer meat?" he demanded.

"Take it, or leave it; I don't keer," said Jepson. He gave the reins to the storekeeper, who had risen, and he walked toward the young man, and paused before him.

"Neal," he said, looking down and putting one hand into his leather belt, "I want ye ter arrest me."

The storekeeper dropped the reins, and stood staring speechlessly, while the mare moved off a few steps and began to crop the grass.

Neal Wright, who was the deputy sheriff of the county, dropped the forelegs of his chair to the ground, and asked, dismayed, "What hev ye done?"

"That thar racin' an' runnin' down Eli Strobe."

"Eli Strobe ain't dead."

"Naw," said Jepson in a melancholy tone, "but I want'er be arrested now."

The deputy meditated for a moment.

"Oh, g'long, Teck," he said, in official perplexity, "I dunno what ter arrest ye fur. 'T war n't nuthin' but a accident."

"Racin' air unlawful," said Jepson, moodily, — "a unlawful act."

"Shucks!" retorted the officer. "Las' week I raced a gray horse o' mine — a good un — with a horse o' Judge Grimm's, o' the Circuit Court. Both of us happened ter be goin' out o' Colb'ry same time. He hearn me a-clippin' behind him, an' he whipped up an' spurred, an' I whipped up an' spurred. Don't he know hossflesh, though, an' don't he love it! Oughter jes' see that bay travel! An' when he war a-gittin' away from me, Judge Grimm jes' turned his big red face round wunst, an' it war all one wink an' grin. Me an' the jedge air out o' jail yit."

"Waal, I gin myself up," persisted Jepson.

"Oh, g'long, Teck." The officer was standing now, and he gave his friend's shoulder an admonitory push. "I don't want ye. I don't wanter kerry ye all the way ter Colb'ry an' cut my visit off. An' I don't b'lieve I could git ye c'mitted ter stan' yer trial noways. The old man" — it was the high sheriff thus antiquated — "air powerful partic'lar 'bout makin' false an' foolish arrests, an' he's responsible fur me." He shook his head in a manner that intimated his sense of the weight of this fact. "Folks can't git arrested fur fun. Naw, sir, I don't want ye. I'll kem arter ye mighty quick ef ennything happens ter Eli. Don't ye be 'fear'd."

"I want ter be arrested now," reiterated Jepson. "His fambly want me arrested."

The deputy looked puzzled. "I don't b'lieve ye, Teck. Ef they did, they 'd make a complaint agin ye, an' git out a warrant."

"They air all wimmen; they dunno how." Then, urgently, "When ye go back ter town, tell the 'old man' ez the crim'nal wanted ter be arrested, and the fambly wanted him ter be jailed, too, an' ye would n't."

"Teck, ye air out'n yer head!" exclaimed Wright.

"Go up ter the house an' ax 'em," said the would-be prisoner.

The deputy, thus summoned from the unofficial ease and pleasure of his visit to the perplexity and caution incident to handling a case new to his short experience, hesitated for a moment, and then, putting his hands in his pockets, set forth, silent, saturnine, circumspect, seeming a very different person from the smart young idler before the white-faced store. He carried the wonder of it with him all adown the turn-row between the ranks of corn and to the doorstep of the house itself. "A body would 'low ez a smart, strong, rampagious feller like Teck would be jes' the one ter gin the sher'ff a turrible race through them mountings." He nodded toward the wooded heights, with a realizing sense of

their value to the ill-doer as an impenetrable covert. Then he lifted his voice in a stentorian "Hello!" for knocking on the door is here little in vogue. The sound summoned little Mrs. Strobe, valiant as a far larger woman might be, and trim, and dapper, with a reproachful lifted forefinger, and a gibe upon her lips, although her curiosity as to his mission quivered through every fibre.

"Waal, stranger, ye could n't holler louder ef ye war a peeg an' 't war killin'-time. Ye'll never go off in a lung complaint. Don't ye know we hev got a sick man in the house?"

Isabel had boldly followed her grandmother, and stood ready to participate in the conversation, should it prove of interest. Marcella came only to the door, but lingered there, leaning against the frame.

"That's jes' what I kem ter speak ter ye 'bout, ma'am," said the officer. "I'm the dep'ty sher'ff o' Kildeer County."

"Laws-a-massy!" exclaimed the old woman, by way of compliment and obeisance to the dignity of his authority.

"An' it hev been tole ter me ez the fambly want Teck Jepson arrested fur unlawfully ridin' a race, an' ridin' down an' injurin' Eli Strobe whilst doin' this unlawful act."

They were all silent, revolving this succinct statement, and adjusting the circumstances thus set forth to their own consciousness of the facts.

"Now," continued Wright, "ef ye'll complain agin him, I'll arrest Jepson an' git him c'mitted, an' land him in jail in Colb'ry ter await the event."

"*Me* want ter jail Teck Jepson fur runnin' a horse along a plain road?" cried the old woman. "Ef ye war n't a stranger, sir, I'd tell ye ez ye air a crazy buzzard."

"Yes'm," said the deputy, sanely agreeing in her view.

"Eli got hurt by accident, through bein' too sharp-set ter arrest folks fur nuthin', an' Teck war his bes' friend in the 'lection. He could n't pull up his horse. Naw, sir; wait till Eli gits better or wuss."

"That's yer conclusion, ma'am?" said the officer, visibly relieved. Then he glanced at Marcella. She stood silent, intent, pondering. The young man's eyes lingered. "Do his darter want Jepson arrested?" he asked, seeking an added respect in using the third person.

Marcella did not answer. That brooding dubitation was still on her face, and her eyes were full of untranslated meanings.

"Speak, chile," urged her grandmother, tartly.

The man's inquiring eyes still lingered; Marcella suddenly raised her own. She looked at him for a moment, and slowly shook her head. A deep flush overspread her face, and she turned hastily within.

That night a wind arose; a great, sonorous, declamatory voice it had. Some rude iconoclastic spirit was rife in its midst, and threatened alike roof-tree and hearth-stone. The shutters were closed; the door was barred; but its heavy touch was on the walls, and every timber shook. The sense of it pervaded the deep unconsciousness that had hitherto enwrapped Eli Strobe. The continuity of the knowledge of cause and effect was broken; he did not realize why he was awake, what turmoil affected his perceptions; he only knew again himself for himself, and talked and raged incoherently, the strength of delirium in his muscles. The little dame and the two frightened girls were alone to experience these undreamed-of terrors; for since the invalid had been so quiescent, and all had been done that was needful, the helping neighbors had felt their services superfluous, and had betaken themselves home. His mind had gone back to the scene of the disaster. As the thunder rolled he would lift himself in bed, ghastly with his bloody, bandaged head, his wild, unreasoning eye, and with his strong right hand upheld warningly as he listened. "Hear! hear!" he would cry. "Hear 'em gallopin' thar horses! Down the very throat o' the law!" And when a new peal sounded louder and deeper than before, he sprang up, catching

at an imaginary bridle, declaring that he had unhorsed Teck Jepson and had broken his neck. And there was Teck now, in hell ! — so surprised to be there, and so taken aback to see the devil, that Eli Strobe, who had sent him thither, could not refrain from laughing. He held his sides while his wild shrieks of frenzied mirth filled the cabin, shriller than the wind, more turbulent than the thunder, as persistent as the rain that came down in torrents upon the roof. The women clung together in terror, and with trembling lips devised futile expedients to quiet him. But the vaunted “yerb tea” failed ; and although at first some vague recognition of Marcella, or Isabel, or his mother would prevail, and after a wild sidelong stare and a doubtful mutter he would consent to lie back upon the pillow and have the quilts drawn close about his shoulders again, he would soon forget them, and would spring up anew ; and presently he recognized them no more. He declared now that one, then another, was Teck Jepson, and should be arrested on the spot. And as a ghastly flash of lightning made a mockery of the gleam of the little tallow dip and the smouldering fire, and filled the room with a quivering blue flare of a blinding intensity, he began to cry out that he was dead, — he was a dead man ; that Teck Jepson had killed him, and nobody cared to avenge him. But he would walk, he protested with a terrible fury ; as a ghost he would walk this earth. He would make the gallows seem a kind fate to the man who had cheated it, and who had torn him from life that was so fair and full, and had cast him into some outer darkness where there was gnashing of teeth ; and he ground his own, with a frightful look on his face. He would meet the man who had slain him, in lonely places, and reveal hideous spiritual errors to him, and some day would fall upon him and throttle him ; and those who might find him would never know why Teck Jepson had died. He would walk, — he would walk ! And he began to gather the sheet about him.

"Oh, Marcellly!" cried the cowering Mrs. Strobe, "I hev done wrong. The yerb tea ain't no good, sure enough, this time, an' mebbe thar war some healin' in the old doctor's powders. He 'lowed they'd keep Eli quiet. Oh, I wish I hed n't flung 'em away! He said the lotium air ter go on the outside, else I'd gin Eli a mouthful o' that. Oh, Marcellly, ef the doctor war jes' hyar agin!"

"I'll go arter him!" cried the girl, springing up with renewed hope.

"Ye sha'n't! Ye sha'n't!" The old woman clutched her arm. "In this storm ez seems ter kem from perdition itself, an' he livin' fourteen miles off! Ye dunno the way. Ye'll git los'."

"Waal," said Marcella, full of courage again, since there was something to do and to risk, "I'll rouse up the nighest neighbors, an' git some o' them ter go."

"I dunno whether they will!" cried Mrs. Strobe, wringing her hands. "I could n't blame 'em ef they would n't. Listen at that wind 'mongst the trees; it sounds ez ef the very mountings war groanin' in mis'ry. An' the thunder, an' the lightnin', an' the rain!"

"I'll try 'em," said Marcella, sturdily.

Her grandmother still clung to her, first remonstrating, then urging and charging her as she prepared to slip through the door. Marcella only stopped to put a red shawl over her head, and then she was out in the blackness of the night and the terrors of the storm. The wind caught the door with so violent a wrench that her grandmother and Isabel had much ado to close it again, and ere they did they called wildly to her to come back; she would be blown away, or a limb of a tree might fall upon her and kill her. There was no response from the darkness without, and as they barred the door they knew that she was gone, and felt as forlorn as if many had been withdrawn instead of one.

Despite her familiarity with every step of the way, Marcella thought herself inconceivably long in reaching the



gate, so buffeted she was by the wind, so thong-like was the lashing rain, so turbulent the elemental commotion. A vivid flash of lightning seemed to meet her there, followed so closely by others, hardly less brilliant, that the effect for a few moments was unintermittent, while the simultaneous thunder rolled. The sinister glare revealed the sky with its myriads of lines of rain; the tormented mountains with their groaning, swaying forests; and close at hand the broad cornfield, the stalks tossed and writhen, here and there flinging up their long blades in a gesture that suggested an appreciated agony. And then all was dark again, and her progress along the turn-row was beset with unexpected difficulty, since the stalks, broken and bent across it, furnished continually recurring barriers. She was glad to emerge into the open road at last, and she paused, breathless for a moment. The difficulties of the way had so absorbed her that she was now canvassing for the first time whom she might best rouse. The storm, since she was in its midst, seemed a more valid obstacle than when her grandmother had suggested it. One neighbor she dismissed from consideration as too old to grant so onerous a favor. Another had a wife and child very ill. A third was afflicted with "lung complaint." As she stood doubtful a certain sound caught her ears in a lull in the wind, — the sound of a hammer and a sledge upon an anvil. How strange, she thought, that Clem Sanders should be at the forge at this hour of the night, — how providential! She had heard none of the rumors subsequent to the parson's vision, and it was out of her mind for the nonce. She only reflected, as she turned her swift steps thither, that Clem Sanders would gladly ride thrice fourteen miles on an errand for her, indifferent to the fury of any mountain storm. "He be powerful skeered o' gal-folks, an' say 'Yes'm' an' 'Naw'm' even ter Is'bel, perliter 'n a pig in a poke, an' he ain't got no conversation 'mongst gals, but he ain't 'feard o' nuthin' else. I'll be bound he ain't 'feard o' the weather."

Her heart was light and warm again; she gathered the wet red shawl closer about her head. What did she care how the rain beat in her face, how the thunder roared! She welcomed the fierce recurrent flare of the lightning; kind it was to show her the rocky ways, that the red clay mire might not cling to her feet and impede her flying steps. The short cut she made took her up the slope of the hill, and she presently found herself approaching the forge on the reverse side from the door. She had hardly heard again the sound of hammer and sledge in the clamors without, but more than once she saw the gleam of the light through the ill-chinked walls, as the fire flared. As she came close she heard the bellows sighing, and the light from the walls hard by flickered out anew. She was near to the little shutter, and she laid her hand upon it. It opened readily under her touch, and she stood looking in.

The interior was flooded with white light, as the bellows fostered the flaring fire. She saw the anvil glitter. A man — Jake Baintree it was — with lifted arm worked at the bellows, while another, whose face was averted, held, with the smith's tongs, a piece of metal in the flames; it was red-hot now; it glowed a lighter tint; it glistened at a white heat, and he turned suddenly and whisked it on the anvil. He lifted his eyes as he moved, and saw before him the square of the open window, the girl's fair, ethereal face framed within it upon the black background of the stormy night, and with the red shawl falling about her head, from the folds of which her curling hair half escaped. He started back, with the hammer in his hand, calling aloud in surprised accents, "Look! Look!"

Jake Baintree turned abruptly, and his eyes met hers.

## XI.

THE bellows ceased to sigh. Bereft of its breath, the riotous white flaring of the forge fire sank suddenly into a listless yellow flame and a dull tawny coal. The shop, transformed from the vividly illuminated interior presented but a moment ago, was a shadowy, cavernous place, suffused with a dusky red glow that barely served to show the anvil, the black hood, the sombre suggestions of wall and roof, and the figures of the two startled men. One still reached upward to the bellows; the other stood with the hammer in his hand, his figure alert and tense against the dim fire, that cast a fluctuating, feeble glimmer upon their faces. Outside the wind went howling by; the torrents were tossed hither and thither in its tempestuous, devious course, and drove heavily before it. Some freakish spirit of the air seemed to catch the shutter in Marcella's grasp, striving to tear it from her; she vainly sought to tighten her hold, feeling like one in a dream, who tries to move, and finds in dismay a hopeless breach between the will and the muscles; but the next moment the fickle blast was gone, leaving the frail batten trembling but passive in her hand. She stared with dilated eyes into the ill-lighted place; her surprise was redoubled as she noticed the evident agitation of the men, and became impressed anew with the strangeness of their presence here at this hour, — their inexplicable intrusion upon the smith's prerogative.

It was she who was first enabled to speak. "Whar's Clem Sanders?" she demanded, in a tone of reprehension and accusation, her voice lifted that it might be heard above the iteration of the rain on the roof and the wild

skirl of the wind as it came and went. So great was the repulsion which Jake Baintree inspired, and her shrinking from the knowledge of his dolorous record of suspicion and imprisonment and ostracism, which branded him with the shame and the cruelty of a crime of which the verdict of the jury declared him innocent, that it was not at his jail-bleached face, distinct amongst the shadows, that she looked, but at the stranger, still motionless beside the anvil, on which the hot metal had cooled to a dull tint, and still with the hammer in his hand, gazing silently at her.

He did not answer; he turned his head slightly and looked at Baintree, as if referring the question to him, — a well-shaped head, with the hair cut so close upon it that the light, striking upward, barely indicated its reddish-yellow tint. Marcella reluctantly followed his glance to Jake Baintree's face, which was suddenly instinct with his wonted sly intelligence.

"Why, howdy, Marcella," he said, as casually as if they had met on the roadside in the summer sunshine. "War ye a-wantin' ter see Clem?"

There seemed something sinister to her in this deliberate ignoring of the singular circumstances of the encounter: she could not account for it; she could only perceive the relief in the stranger's manner, a covert reliance on Jake Baintree's cleverness to possess the situation. He looked down, and mechanically turned the piece of iron on the anvil with the smith's tongs, and she knew he thus hid a smile of relish of his coadjutor's ready retort.

She was easily angered, and it was not in Eli Strobe's daughter to be readily affrighted. She replied with that note of reproof and objection with which she had inaugurated the conversation. "I never would hev kem ter Clem Sanders's forge a-sarchin' fur you-uns," she said. "I never would hev expected ter see ye hyar."

Somehow, her faculties seemed extended in some sort. She was looking at Baintree's sharp features, cut upon

the darkling shadows about him, and yet she knew that the stranger, although his head was bent down, was gazing at her with fixed and curious eyes. She did not realize the interest awakened by her face, richly dim in the shadow, like an old painting, pale no longer, but with the dull flush of excitement and anger, her brilliant clear eyes and the curling tangles of the wind-tossed hair indefinite against the folds of the dark red shawl and the obscurity without. She was feeling baffled; her nerves were strained; somewhere the terrible heights gave forth a wild, sonorous, maddened voice, full of a frantic anguish, and she was reminded of her father, and his torturing frenzy, and her errand for help, which the surprise had effaced for the instant. She suddenly flung out her arms toward them through the window.

"He's dyin'! He's dyin'! An' I mought ez well go ax the mountings fur help ez you-uns!"

She fell half fainting against the window-frame, hardly noticing that, with a change of expression and an abrupt start, Jake Baintree came with his deft, light step toward her. But when he was near she shrank from him, with that aversion which one experiences from the propinquity of a cold-blooded animal, and she stood erect. His voice was full of feeling, and she was sensible of an effort at self-reproach, as a duty which she owed him as reparation.

"Laws-a-massy, Marcelly, air Eli wuss? I kin do ennythin' fur him ez Clem Sanders kin."

She glanced quickly at the stranger, to judge if he had smiled again, perchance, at her outburst, so alert was her pride to take cognizance of ridicule even at the moment that she was sobbing out her errand. His face was grave, so far as the shadows would reveal it. Then her attention reverted to Jake Baintree, and she looked at him with a wondering distrust and curiosity as he suddenly exclaimed, "The Lord's hand is in it!" So pious he was, to be sure, for a man who had renounced religion, and who had no

other use for a river than a wild fowl might find. "The Lord's hand is in it! No use ter ride fourteen mile; this hyar man's a doctor, Marcelly, an' he 'll physic Eli."

He laid his hand on the shoulder of the man at the anvil, who turned and stared at him in palpable amazement. The fire was so low she could barely see his face, but his whole attitude was expressive of surprise and objection.

"He's a valley man, Marcelly, an' he be a powerful smart man," Jake Baintree said, with less the air of introduction than of a showman commending a work of art. "He's the doctor ez physicked me whilst in jail, an' he brung me through wonderful; an' that's how I kem ter be 'quainted with him. He 'll kem right straight, Marcelly," he continued, with an assurance as of a proprietor. "Ye jes' run home out'n the rain; we 'll kem ez soon ez we kin. I dunno what ailed me ter let ye stan' out thar in the rain an' under them drippin' eaves all this time. Ye jes' g'long, an' we 'll foller ye."

Marcella hesitated for a moment; then turned away from the window, and the dull red scene within disappeared as if it had been caught up into the black night. Outside it seemed darker, if that were possible, than before; the lightnings had ceased their delirious quiver; the winds were steadier; the rain was a continuous downpour. She kept her hand on the wall of the forge, as she slowly made the circuit around it, still trembling with the excitements of the evening, and anxiously malcontent with the result of the interview. What strange man was this, that lent himself to these curious midnight labors, these unwarranted intrusions? What could he be doing in that forge, with the smith's tongs, and swage, and bellows, that he wielded as his own? And why was he secret about it, and easily startled and affrighted? And how amazing was it that he, a physician, should be at the disposal of Jake Baintree, and accept his guidance! Then she recollected the astonishment of the stranger, plainly shown, upon Jake Baintree's

proposal that he should act in the place of the distant physician. Was he a doctor at all? she wondered; and suddenly she remembered his evident reluctance, and was chilled with the contradictory fear that after all he might not come. More than once she paused, as she stumbled along in the darkness, to judge if perchance, amidst the clamors of the elements, she might hear their footsteps splashing in the muddy road behind her. No sound save the march of the legions of the rain down and down the valley; the wind wailed afar off, under sentence of exile. An utter darkness overspread all the world. She might not have kept the road, save for that strange yet familiar phenomenon of the independence of the muscles, by which one mechanically performs actions, the processes of which have no recognized correlative consciousness in the brain. Her feet found the way which her intelligence could not discern. She presently felt the wet blades of the cornstalks in her face, and knew that she was in the turn-row, walking as one blind or asleep along the straight, narrow space, and turning when the gate was reached. Again she paused to listen if any footfall followed: only the turmoils of the rain sobbing in the half-spent passion of the storm, and the melancholy stirring of the forests, until suddenly an alien sound smote her ear, a high, cracked, exhausted voice, now talking incoherently, now seeking to scream with muscles that failed midway, all betokening the continued delirium within the cabin. The proximity of the dwelling was further suggested by the feeble flicker through the crevices of the batten shutter. Once more she reflected how powerless they within were to succor or subdue this strange, distraught spirit that seemed to have invaded their home; how far away that entity whom they knew as Eli Strobe had journeyed, unconscious of their efforts, unresponsive to their appeals. When she reached the porch she lingered, peering into the darkness; the rain had almost ceased near at hand; farther away she could hear the pattering of the long files of drops into the valley

below, but it had a fitful, discursive effect, and betokened that this verge of the rain-cloud had followed into the vasty vagueness wherein the great vaporous masses were expended. The vines close at hand were all dripping, dripping; more than once the iteration of the drops beguiled into hopeful credulity her anxious desire to hear a step close at hand. Although a comparative silence, or rather a sense of spent sound, made the air null, there was some vague stir in the upper atmosphere; for once or twice the rifts rent in the black, overhanging clouds showed the palpitating splendors of a white star. A raucous sound made her start, — only a frog croaking in a pool by the fence. And once more that wild, strange voice within rang out, with all its suggested lapses of identity to make her shrink and wince. She burst into tears, and turned again toward the gate. She would not go in and tell the frantic grandmother and sister how her mission had failed, how she had been mocked and derided with fantastic misrepresentations and promises. A physician, was he, forsooth, a “mighty smart man,” who would haunt the little mountain forge in company with Jake Baintree, in the secret midnight, for some inexplicable purpose, and wield the hammer at the anvil! She knew little of the habitudes of this world, but she sneered with contempt of her own credulity as she sought to imagine the only medical man within her ken, the old country doctor, at such escapades, — he of the big spectacles, and the rickety buggy, and the bald head, and the black store-clothes. Conventionality, reliability, and respectability could not have been more expressively impersonated.

Again that wild, exhausted wail from within, the vague sound of the troubled comments of the watchers, and she started anew upon her mission to arouse the neighbors; weeping that so much time had been wasted, and her heart throbbing with anger and resentment that she had been so ready a dupe. She had reached the turn-row, when suddenly



the galloping of horses invaded the silence, the hoof-beats resonant, as they splashed into the pools of the red clay road. She stood still amongst the leaning stalks, listening, hoping, doubting. Her heart sank in an interval of silence; then that turbulent sound of swift equestrians was again upon the air, and she knew that the horsemen were coming in single file down the turn-row. She faced about precipitately, and ran like a frightened deer. She would be there first; they should never know that she had doubted them, and had come forth to search for others. She was half laughing and half crying, in the intensity of her relief, in her relish of her own quick resource. Nevertheless, she had barely reached the gate, so swift was their progress, when they reined up beside it; she silently ran through it in the darkness, and in the interval while they dismounted and hitched their horses she made her way to the porch. The shaft of light that fell out into the night, as Mrs. Strobe, hearing their approach, cautiously opened the door, revealed Marcella, her tall figure swathed in her clinging wet garments, her red shawl twisted about her throat, her dense hair weighted with rain hanging upon her shoulders, her eyes soft and dewy, her lips all tenderly smiling upon the advancing shadows.

"I fetched him, Marcella!" Jake Baintree exclaimed, as he came up the steps of the porch, and the light from the room showed his keen, clearly cut face, shiny with the rain, and his eyes, all eager with interest and excitement, sharply glancing out from under his hat-brim. "He 'lowed he could n't do nuthin' 'thout his physic, so he an' me hed ter take time ter go — yander," — he hesitated suddenly and spoke with embarrassment, jerking his thumb vaguely over his shoulder, — "ter git his med'cine-chist. Good-evenin', Mis' Strobe," he went on, his voice the very essence of oily propitiation, as he caught sight of the little dame, seeming forlorn, and smaller and more wrinkled than ever, as she peered out of the door. The long-legged Isabel could easily

look over her shoulder, and she did. "Powerful sorry ter hear from Marcellly how Eli hev been tuk. I hev brung a doctor-man, ez hev been abidin' with me, ter see ef he can't settle him somehows."

Mrs. Strobe's head was cocked askew in inquiry. What kind of a "doctor-man" was this who abode with Jake Baintree? Then, as a strange, angry mutter came from the room within, she looked over her shoulder with a frightened gesture.

"Ennybody ez be named 'doctor' mought ez well try thar hand on Eli, kase ef they can't make him no better, I reckon they can't make him no wuss," she assented, not too graciously. Her sharp eyes strove to pierce the gloom that hung about the dusky shadow that followed Jake Baintree toward the door. There was still suggested in the manner of the figure that reluctance which Marcella had noted at the forge. It angered her in some sort and it excited her curiosity. She felt an antagonism toward him, despite the anxious, absorbing emotions that might have been supposed to crowd out every other sentiment. The next moment she had forgotten all except that she had brought help where it was so sorely needed. In the necessity for exertion during the last hour and the hardships of the storm, she had been spared something of the full realization of the calamity that had befallen them. But as Mrs. Strobe opened the door, and Marcella caught sight of her father anew, she winced from the strange metamorphosis that delirium had wrought; the alien spirit that possessed the accustomed face and figure almost thwarted recognition. He had risen, wrapped in the sheets, still clinging to his spectral delusion; and as the flicker of the fire rose and fell, and the tallow dip flared and sputtered, his sheeted figure, with its bandaged bloody head, was dim and ghostly in the dusky corner of the cabin where he stood, fantastically gesticulating, unnoting the new-comers even while his burning eyes were riveted upon them, still muttering

his threats of vengeance on the man who he declared had slain him.

"Scot-free! Scot-free," he exclaimed. "I'll walk! I'll walk!"

Jake Baintree's hat fell from his nerveless hand, as he stood gazing, open-mouthed, at the phenomenon of frenzy for the first time presented to his scanty experience. Mrs. Strobe and Isabel, somewhat accustomed to their terrors, took heed of it with a certain painful curiosity as to its further developments.

"He 'lows he air a harnt," said Mrs. Strobe in a low voice to Baintree. "An' ef that air the way he air goin' ter behave whenst he air dead, a body oughter take a power o' pains ter keep him alive. I hope he'll last out my time, the Lord knows."

Marcella blessed the tears that crowded out the sight, and as she turned to the stranger, who was entering last of all, and wiped her eyes with the fringed end of the wet shawl, all her heart was in the words, as she adjured him, "Fur the Lord's sake! Fur the Lord's sake!" and fell to sobbing anew.

He made no reply, and it seemed to her — and she could have smitten him for it — a most casual glance that he cast toward the master of the house, now striding about, unintelligibly calling aloud in a raucous voice; now shrinking into the corner and standing close against the wall, muttering in sinister fashion. And surely, surely nothing could have been more deliberate and unexcited than the manner with which the doctor divested himself of his hat and a long shiny black overcoat, a strange garment in this locality, where waterproof luxuries had never prevailed. She looked loweringly at him as he quietly drew off his gloves. Now that he stood revealed, she saw that he was a young man, — as young as Jake Baintree himself; he had a fair complexion, retaining its distinctive characteristic, despite the temporary sunburn. His mustache, of the reddish-yellow

tint of his hair, was long and silky ; but the growth about the lower part of his face was in that unbecoming stage known as "turning out a beard." His attire was different from that of the men of the region, although it vied with theirs in its simplicity. He wore blue flannel trousers, with long rubber boots drawn to the knees, and a blue flannel shirt. He was singularly trim and light despite the suggestions of sinew and strength about him, and he had long, soft white hands. She noted their deft certainty of touch as he took the little black medicine-chest to the table and opened it slowly, showing its rows of tiny vials, on which Mrs. Strobe and Isabel gazed with dilated eyes.

He was not slow when he had selected what he wanted : he crossed the room with a quick, sure step, and laid his hand upon his patient's arm.

"Come, Jake," he said in a low voice to Baintree ; and as the mountaineer slouched heavily across the floor, Marcella sank into a chair, putting her hands over her eyes that she might not see the doughty Eli Strobe overpowered in this painfully unequal struggle.

She could not have believed that it would be so soon over. A succession of hoarse screams ; the sound of ineffectual, ill-aimed blows ; the dragging of heavy feet across the puncheons ; wild, half-articulate curses, growing now disjointed and again only a broken word, subsiding at last to a drowsy mutter, and Eli Strobe was silent and asleep.

The stillness seemed to Marcella sinister. She lifted her head slowly, and gazed fearfully up. The two men had placed the insensible constable on the bed. The stranger was flushed with exertion, his lips parted in a triumphant smile, showing his strong white shining teeth beneath his yellow mustache. He wiped his brow with a white handkerchief ; the same office was performed by Jake Baintree with his handy coat-sleeve.

"Whew-w !" the mountaineer commented. "Eli be ez survigrous ez a yoke o' steers."

"Waal, sir!" exclaimed Mrs. Strobe, with a deep sigh of relief and content, the sparkle again in her little bird-like eye, the parchment-like tint of her visage disappearing under a flush of pleasure. "Did enny mortal ever see ennythin' done like that! I'd like ter hev some o' that thar stuff, doctor," she declared. "Ye mought leave we-uns a bottle."

The powerful odor of a strange drug was diffused through the room, and the physician turned and placed the door a trifle ajar before he approached the fire, where Jake Baintree was already seated.

"Set down, doctor, — set down, doctor," said Mrs. Strobe, pushing a chair toward him. "Yes, sir, I'd like ter hev a bottle. What a thing that physic would be fur fractious chil'n! — put 'em ter sleep off thar meanness. I never hed but one chile, — that thar big buffalo, Eli, thar." She had resumed her wonted note toward her son, now that he had relapsed into his old familiar self, lacking the dreadful dignity of one about to be summoned to a new and untried world, and no longer exciting the painful tenderness and prescient grief that hang upon a possible loss. "But I hev seen him a many a time whenst it would hev brung a heap o' peace in the house ef he could hev been put ter sleep that-a-way, in the midst o' his tantrums. Can't ye leave a bottle o' it, doctor?"

Isabel looked up apprehensively, thinking herself the possible candidate for this new and unique method of discipline.

But the stranger said he had none to spare for the subjugation of domestic insurgents, and no more than he needed himself; and although Marcella observed that, as he put the bottle into its groove in the case and shut the lid with a snap, his face wore a smile of relish or of ridicule, she did not resent it, so grateful was she, so ready to fall at his feet. Still, terrors beset her; it seemed too good to be true.

"He ain't dead, doctor?" she asked, in a tone of expostulation, glancing at the motionless figure on the bed.

"Not at all," he rejoined, showing his fine teeth.

“Shet up, Marcelly; ye hev got no sense,” urged her grandmother; for the natty Mrs. Strobe was all herself again. “Set down, doctor, an’ rest yer bones. Won’t ye hev a toddy ter sorter hearten ye up? I hev got some apple-jack hyar strong enough ter climb a tree. Jake,” she continued, turning toward Baintree, “jes’ ketch a-holt o’ the handle o’ that thar jimmy-john in the corner, an’ haul it hyar. I’d ax Marcelly, ’ceptin’ she looks ’bout broke in two; an’ I’d git it myself, ’ceptin’ the jimmy-john’s too nigh my size.”

The apology was needless, for Jake Baintree seemed complimented to be permitted to make himself useful, and brought out the demijohn with much glad alacrity. Marcella marveled in self-reproachful dismay that she should have such strange thoughts, but as Jake Baintree poured the fluid into a glass she noted how sinewy and thin his hands were, and white as the doctor’s own, — so long had they been idle and listless in jail; and she wondered with which of them he had killed Samuel Keale, — with both, perchance, — and if handcuffs had been put on those long, bony wrists while he languished in prison. And when he offered her a glass, she shuddered and drew back, and shook her head without a word. Mrs. Strobe also declined to join in the potations. “Sperits air all well enough fur men,” she observed, — “they hev got so little sense ennyhow, it don’t matter ef they gits foolisher ’n nat’ral wunst in a while; but ef the Lord ’ll spare my reason, I’ll onder-take ter help him.”

As the stranger sat drinking the athletic apple-jack so graphically described by Mrs. Strobe, he seemed less reluctant, less doubtful, than before. He said almost nothing, however, leaving the conversation to Jake Baintree, watching him with interest, and in the intervals of silence meditatively eying the smouldering fire. He had the air of holding himself in abeyance, and quietly awaiting developments. He seemed to indorse all that Baintree said, who

talked eagerly, and was by no means averse to giving an account of his friend.

"I war powerful glad Marcelly met up with we-uns, Mis' Strobe," he said, as he sat on the opposite side of the fire, his elbows on his knees, his hat pushed back on his sleek black hair, his eyes seeming hardly so crafty and bright since they betokened such kindliness, that Marcella was reminded anew of his gratitude to her father for the logical stand as to his innocence which the constable had taken after his acquittal. "I never war so glad ez I hed this hyar doctor-man visitin' me." The stranger always had that covert smile, barely to be detected, on his face, when he was thus designated; but he raised the glass to his lips, and, except by Marcella, it was not noticed. "He physicked me whenst I war sick in jail, an' I knowed he war a powerful survigrous man ter hev around wheinst folks air ailin'."

Mrs. Strobe was gracious enough to refrain from controverting this proposition. As she sat in the chimney-corner, with her tiny feet perched upon the rung of the chair, she looked discerningly, and withal approvingly, at the stranger, while Jake Baintree continued his queer introductory discourse. Nevertheless, she wondered why they did not finish drinking their liquor and go, for the hour was wearing close to the dawn, and, wiry and sturdy as she was, she began to feel the effects of her vigil and excitement. Her gratitude, however, kept her awake, and curiosity had a stimulating influence. She wondered, too, how the ostracized Jake Baintree had so very capable a "doctor-man" at his disposal.

"The *old* doctors, they 'low they know everything in creation, but they *don't*," Baintree said, voicing a most mundane sentiment.

Mrs. Strobe nodded her head in unabashed acquiescence, despite the destroyed powders, the futile "yerb tea," and the subsequent delirium, — so transitory are the effects even

of the lessons of experience, the best of all teachers though it be. Man may be defined as the animal who will not learn.

"But folks hev ter find that out fur tharselves," continued the wily Baintree, "so he hed nuthin' ter do, sca'ce-ly, down thar in Glaston. Folks ginerally 'low they don't want a young doctor l'arnin' on them."

"Yes, better take keer of yer lungs, an' yer liver, an' yer stomick. No gittin' enny new ones," Mrs. Strobe agreed unexpectedly.

Jake Baintree seemed to lose his balance at this for a moment, then plunged on resolutely: "So hevin' nuthin' ter do thar, he kem up hyar ter see me."

Notwithstanding his incidental air, Mrs. Strobe began to perceive that he was definitely driving at something, and he was clever enough to detect this in her sharp eyes, as she fixed them with renewed wonderment upon him. He went directly to the point, with an air of great candor: "Fac' is, Mis' Strobe, he don't want folks ginerally ter know he be hyarabouts. Nobody would hev knowed it, nohow, ef he hed n't kem out ter do you-uns a favior. Clem Sanders would fairly brain us with that big sledge o' his'n, ef he knew we'd been foolin' with his forge. He's a powerful survigrous man, an' he would n't think nuthin' o' hammerin' us up on the anvil, an' drawin' us down fine. So him an' me too would be obleeged ter ye you-uns" — he included Marcella and Isabel in his glance — "would n't say nuthin' 'bout seein' him. It's his bizness, an' nobody else's."

The stranger bore with an admirable calmness the stare of amazement which Mrs. Strobe and Isabel fixed upon him. Marcella, who had seen him wielding the hammer at the forge, felt her capacity for surprise blunted. She was prepared to hear anything. Mrs. Strobe's lower jaw dropped a little in dismay. She was sufficiently sophisticated to know that a physician might have slain his fellow-men in the regu-



lar course of business without finding it desirable to seclude himself in the mountains with the ostracized Baintree. Her inevitable conclusion was quickly reached, — it was not in the regular course of business; he was, doubtless, a fugitive from the law, hiding in the wilderness from the officers of justice. So simple a solution of the mystery was it that it had also forced itself irresistibly on both Marcella and Isabel, who gazed upon him with mingled pity, and awe, and repugnance. His hazel eyes were fixed upon the fire, and now and again he lifted the glass of apple-jack to his lips.

Despite the definiteness of Mrs. Strobe's convictions in general, when an emergency or perplexity supervened, she was less ready to reach a decision than her granddaughter.

"We ain't got no call ter tell, sure," said Marcella. "Dad would hev been dead ef he hed n't kem ter help us."

"He would!" echoed Isabel.

"Yes, sir! We hev got Eli agin, some sim'lar ter what he useter was," said the old woman, recovering herself in her recollection of her ascendancy over her big son. "An' what war ye a-doin' of in the forge?" she demanded, turning her lively eye on Baintree.

He looked down into his glass and shook it gently, watching the amber and ruby light of the fire as it struck through the liquor. He made no pretense of consultation with his friend; he answered for him: —

"Waal, I'd ez soon tell ye ez not, Mis' Strobe." He grinned significantly as he nodded at the physician, who had chanced to glance at the bed where his patient lay. The demonstration said as plainly as if he had spoken, "Some day when *he* is away, I will tell you all."

The old woman nodded her acquiescence and comprehension, and as the stranger abruptly turned his head he came very near surprising them at this telegraphy. Mrs. Strobe spoke precipitately to cover her confusion: —

"I'll be powerful pleased, the Lord knows, not ter tell

nuthin'. I be a mighty partic'lar woman with my words. Folks hev got ter be, ef thar kin hev dealin's in politics. Mos'ly ef ye tell the truth ye 'll prosper, but them in pol'tics air ez 'feard o' the truth ez a toper o' cold water. Jes' gin 'em the fac's, an' they 'll see snakes! Ye need n't be 'feard I 'll tell the truth, stranger," — that sly, superficially grave look on her thin lips. "I hev seen too much mis'ry kem from sech practices."

But the stranger seemed embarrassed and slightly ill at ease, and glanced doubtfully at Jake Baintree, who drained the last drop in his glass. As he held it, empty, still leaning forward, he gazed propitiatingly at her, as she sat shaking with her silent chuckle.

"Ye 're funnin', ain't ye, Mis' Strobe?"

"Ye want me ter tell the truth, then, Jake? Waal, it's a mighty tough strain, but I 'll try."

Baintree had risen; he stood swinging his hat in his hand, and laughing, with an effort at geniality.

"Naw, Mis' Strobe; we-uns don't want ye an' the gals ter say nuthin', — that 'll be ez big a favior ter we-uns ez this hyar doctor-man done you-uns."

"We-uns ain't a-goin' ter tell nuthin'," said Marcella, taking the initiative once more.

"Naw, we ain't," echoed Isabel.

"We ain't likely ter resk ennythin' we ain't used ter, like tellin' the truth," said Mrs. Strobe waggishly.

Baintree rather sheepishly continued to swing his hat; then, as he glanced toward the door, still half ajar, "It's day!" he said.

The puncheon floor of the uninclosed passage without showed in a timorous, colorless medium, too neutral to express the idea of light, too null for darkness. The old dog passed by, distinctly visible, stretching his limbs and yawning, as he looked casually into the room; then went off, wagging his tail slightly, as if pleased in the main to be

reminded of his friends within. As the two men came out together, slowly, followed by the family, they paused to observe the traces of the storm, the dripping, moisture-laden aspect of tree and vine and wall, the dank, heavy air, the pallid ranks of the corn, here and there beaten down to the ground. A bird's-nest, long ago empty, the sport of the winds, was lying upon the porch. Marcella picked up the frail and fibrous thing, suggestive of fleeting song, and transitory love, and lapsing summer. The young stranger had fixed a speculative gaze upon her, as she leaned against the vine-draped post, her hair dry again and freshly curling, the dull fringes of her red shawl against the warm whiteness of her neck, her long lashes pensively veiling her downcast eyes. He mechanically threw his waterproof coat over one arm, as he stood, and with the other hand he meditatively turned the end of his long yellow mustache, unheeding Jake Baintree, who was remarking, "I'll be bound, Mis' Strobe, thar's a heap o' timber down in the woods." The mountaineer glanced away at the opaque densities of the mists that filled the valleys, and rose to the mountain-tops, and hung about the little cabin, and had a drearier pallor than the gray sky, where, indeed, once or twice a glittering point betokened a fading star in the rifts of the clouds. Then the two men went down the steps and through the gate, and they and their horses were lost to sight in the vapors before they reached the turn-row.

Mrs. Strobe and Isabel stood and stared at the point where they had vanished, until they could no longer hear the regular hoof-beats, growing ever fainter and fainter; but Marcella still turned the relic of the spring weavings in her hand, and took pensive note of the autumn in its riddled and void meshes.

Isabel spoke first.

"That thar stranger air the curiousest man of all the men ez hev ever been ter this house," she observed oracu-

larly, as if she were a competent judge of "curiousness," and a connoisseur in human bric-à-brac.

Her grandmother chuckled.

"An' that's a bold sayin'," commented the little old cynic.

## XII.

THE mists continued to press close about the little cabin. The sunless day hardly gave evidence how it was wearing on, so imperceptibly did the shadows grow less gray. Some movement there was in the dense folds of the opaque vapors, for now even the vines on the porch were invisible, and anon all their leaves were abnormally definite on the blank white surface of the background. A continuous drip sounded from the eaves, but otherwise the world seemed strangely silent, until the mincing footfalls of a pacing nag came dull and muffled along the dank turn-row, and announced to Mrs. Strobe the approach of old Dr. Boyce.

"Now, ain't it a blessin'," she observed to her granddaughters, "ez that thar perverse old man never tuk it inter that head o' his'n — an' it 's full o' notions — ter kem no earlier. He mought hev met the t'other feller, an' thar's nuthin' in this worl' one doctor hates like another one. An' ef 't war n't fur the law ez keeps 'em off'n one another, thar 'd be mo' scatterin' o' brains, an' hair, an' bones round graveyards 'n thar be now. Ef ye want ter see one o' 'em take a fit, jes' let him know some other doctor hev been meddlin' with his patient, ez he calls it. A mighty good word fur it, too. Patient he air, — the feller hev got ter learn patience, sure! This hyar old man can't abide it, ef he ain't allowed ter pizen folks his own way ; an' ef ye don't foller his directions edzac'ly, he 'll gin the case up. An' then ye mought git well, stiddier dyin' respectably, 'cordin' ter the doctor's prescriptions."

She rose, with her speciously grave expression puckering her thin lips, and went to meet him on the porch, as he

came up the path, with his saddle-bags over his arm. "Good-mornin', doctor," she observed, with great suavity.

"Good-morning, madam," he said with a cheerful note. He was propitiated by a certain up-all-night aspect in the three feminine members of the household, which his discerning eye could well distinguish from the activity of the habitual early riser. It implied due anxiety and attention to any possible or probable want of his patient. He had scant interest in people whose lungs, liver, heart, and stomach were in a normal condition. They were merely unindividualized cumberers of the ground, except as they ministered to that genus whom he sought to exalt into a tyrant of absolute sway, his patient. He himself bowed down before it with an unswerving devotion and an unchanging assiduity, despite its protean aspect, whether it were only two feet long, and writhing with the colic, or as big as Eli Strobe, with a dignified fracture of the skull; and he saw to it that every possible knee was also crooked in subservience. It was a favorite formula with him, "If my patient can't sleep, not a soul in the house shall bat an eye all night." And thus there were always powders or drops to be administered with appalling frequency, if the sufferer should chance to awake.

Therefore he looked with approving eyes at Mrs. Strobe, and dismissed as gratuitous certain anxieties that had harassed him since parting from her yesterday, because of her earnest advocacy of "yerb tea," and her evident reluctance to defer to his judgment.

"How 's my patient, madam?" he asked, as he lumbered up the steps.

He was not, properly speaking, a fat man; he might better be described as merely ample. He was not muscular; he seemed flabbily large. His face had sundry deep dimples, visible even when not smiling, and he had a fair, fresh complexion, and was close-shaven. He was perhaps some sixty years old, and he was ostentatious in the use of his spectacles, after the manner of one who regards age as a

sort of gradual promotion. He was quite bald, and wore a dark wig, or what is known as a "scratch." It hardly served any purpose of deception, for often he thrust it far back on his head, showing his broad, full-fronted brow; and sometimes, in his office, on a warm day, he hung it on the door-knob or the back of a chair, contracting thereby many an influenza and neuralgia, which he would have considered of serious interest had it been the choice possession of one of his patients.

"Not awake yet?" he said, glancing at the pillow as he entered. He sat down beside the bed, and, motioning to Marcella to open the shutter, he adjusted his spectacles, and bent forward to scrutinize the sleeping face.

Mrs. Strobe, secretly scornful as she watched him, was amazed to see him draw back, with an expression of doubting surprise, and with his soft, deft fingers feel the pulse of the wounded man. His eyes with a suspicious gleam sought hers.

"How did he spend the night?" he asked curtly.

"Waal," cautiously admitted Mrs. Strobe, "the fust o' the night he war sorter rampagious. Arter that he slept."

The doctor rose slowly, looking very large and limp as he stood solemnly confronting the little dame. "Mrs. Strobe," he demanded, "what was done to this man?"

"Why, law, doctor, you-uns know!" she cried. "Teck Jepson jes' rid him down, an' bust his head open, an'"—

"Woman," he thundered, "this man has been drugged!"

Mrs. Strobe quailed. She would not have believed the discovery possible to his vaunted science.

"Jes' a leetle yerb tea," she faltered.

He stared at her, baffled, and doubting if it were possible to elicit the truth from her. He knitted his bare brows, for his wig was far back on his bald poll. The mystery of it all stemmed for the time the rising tide of his tumultuous indignation. "Why did n't you give him the powders I left, as directed?" he demanded.

"Law, doctor, they could n't make no diff'unce, — that thar leetle trash stuff."

The doctor's bald head flushed to the nape of his neck. Despite his scanty consideration of people who were in the enjoyment of full health, he could not strike Mrs. Strobe. There was only one course open to him, professionally speaking.

"I give up the case. I will not be responsible," he sputtered, stooping down to pick up his saddle-bags. Suddenly he caught sight of the wan, haggard, sleeping face on the pillow, and the loyalty of a whole life flamed up anew toward its object. "No, I won't, — I won't, neither! I won't leave my patient to be murdered amongst you. Yes, murdered!" he vociferated; "for if my directions and my medicines are tampered with again, and my patient dies, I'll have you every one indicted for murder; you hear me, — for *murder*! Poisoning my patient!" He wagged his half-draped head with a knowing look. He had not lived in this world so long as not to be aware of the terror that the ignorant have of that unknown, unmeasured force, the law. Even the doughty Mrs. Strobe seemed very small and wizened, as she contemplated the prospect. He followed up his advantage: "Come here!" — he turned to Marcella; "you look like you have some sense. I'll leave my directions with you, and you see you carry them out. Do just as I say. Think I won't know it if you don't, as soon as I get here?"

"Mighty apt, sure," Mrs. Strobe conceded, in a conciliatory tone.

But the big doctor, who seemed, as he stood about, to occupy more than his share of the little cabin, only gave a snort of derisive rage at this overture, and prepared his medicines in stern and puffing silence. He was still breathless when he gathered up his saddle-bags and started toward the door. He came back, and looked in again to say, with a threatening air, when he would repeat his visit; and they



presently heard the ambling hoof-beats of his horse that took him up the turn-row, and so away.

It might seem that Mrs. Strobe could not easily recover from the stress of this interview, but her elasticity was altogether unstrained, and she rebounded from her humiliating detection with the alert grace of one who, from good-nature, ignores a defiance, having ample resources at call.

"Gin up the case!" she cried scornfully. "An' what do we-uns keer, with a doctor-man o' our own, what Jake Bain-tree fotched! I hed a great mind ter tell 'bout'n him, an' how peart he war, but I war 'feard o' hurtin' the old man's feelin's. Murderin' Eli,—I say! I war so mad wunst I hed a great mind ter throttle the old man;" which the doctor would have esteemed a terrible intention in a woman of Mrs. Strobe's size, had he known she entertained it. "But how did he find out Eli hed tuk the t'other doctor's medicine? I tell ye, now, Marcellly, that thar old man hev got eyes in the back o' his head, an' kin see fourteen mile off through a thunder-storm in the night-time 'thout strainin' his sight."

Mrs. Strobe affected to hope that he would continue angry, and fail to keep his engagement; but her relief was very patent when he reappeared with his saddle-bags the next day, and the next, and still again. He took little note of her except to treat her remarks with a sedulous show of unconcern. He asked Marcella keen and searching questions as to his patient during his absence, and strained to the uttermost their every capacity and all the resources of the little cabin to subserve the invalid's comfort. All was ungrudgingly and submissively accorded, but, nevertheless, he began to look very grave as the days wore on, and now and then he solemnly shook his bald head.

"What makes him shake his head that-a-way, Marcellly?" the old woman demanded. "Ter make sure thar's nuthin' in it? He need n't look so disappointed. I could hev tole him ez much ez that, an' kep' him from expectin' ter hear it rattle."

Outside the world took its way, unheeding, down the oft-trodden course of the year. The dank mists clung long to range and valley. They lifted at last, and then the torrents of the recent storm seemed to have been charged with pigments, for bold dashes of color, of red, of a luminous yellow, accented yet tempered by intervals of purplish and bronze intimations, emblazoned the mountain-side, where a monotony of summer green had lately held sway. The sun, coming again with a fluctuating brilliancy, with far-reaching misty refractions, and anon diaphanous veilings, to displace the surly usurpations of the grimmer gray elements, found a responsive glow in the sudden enrichment of the world. The far-away ranges had acquired a new charm of azure, an exquisitely pure tone, but of a dull, unglossy softness, all unlike the enameled blue of the great crystalline sky. The air was pervaded by a fine aroma. The wind had wings: one could sometimes see the shadows of these subtle, swift invisibilities flutter in the cloudless sunshine, so vaguely that before a glance might seek to measure an airy pinion the fleet thing was gone. Enchantment boldly wandered forth into the broad daylight, and all lavish splendors were vagrant. In every fence corner, the lush grasses and weeds, heavy with seeds, were bepainted with a brush full of color, — amber, and brown, and red; even the cobwebs, gossamer and silver in the sun, hung from rail to rail upon the old fences, and bedizened their gaunt homeliness with a delicate fibrous grace. Oh, gone was the summer, and it would come no more, however the recurrent season might wear its similitude. Marcella was living her life out; she was not the light-hearted creature that the spring had found her. She felt that she was older by many summers, and she did not need Andy Longwood to tell her so.

“Ye hev got ter be ez solemn ez — I dunno what all. An’ ye used ter laff, an’ laff, an’ laff. Now ye can’t crack a joke ter save yer life. An’ ef ennybody else gits ter funnin’, ye don’t pay no ’tention ter what they say.”

The young fellow sat, as was his wont in his frequent visits, on the step of the porch, his head, with its tousled curls and its big hat, leaning back against the post and the thinning yellow vines. His expression was slightly sullen, and implied a despondent appeal, although his muscles asserted a cheerful habit, altogether independent of his mind and heart, and he mechanically laid a clasp knife upon one closed fist, and with a dextrous twist of the wrist flung it to the ground, piercing the moist earth with its point, after the manner of the expert mumble-the-peg player. Now and then he looked up at Marcella, who sat spinning, spinning, ceaselessly at her little flax-wheel, until it seemed to him — the whirl ringing in his ears, the sight of the wheel whirling until it was only a dazzling spokeless circle — that they were his heartstrings which she was thus drawing out into these attenuated threads, and that there would not be enough hope, or courage, or any of the essential endowments left for him to live upon by the time she had wound these intimate fibres into balls. So forlorn was this “frequent visitor.”

“Ye don’t never notice nobody nor nuthin’, nowadays,” he said, a trifle hampered in his complaint by the presence of the wiry Isabel, who sat at the other end of the step, and of his own dog, who looked, as he took up his position between the two, intelligent enough to understand the conversation, and independent enough to repeat it. “Got nuthin’ ter say ter nobody, nor nuthin’.”

He meant himself by this negative description, and the sharp-eyed Isabel understood as much. Despite her precocity she had the lamentable lack of tact characteristic of her age, and her mind was a blank as to matters amatory. She intended to be very agreeable when she said, with a toss of her tangled hair, “Marcelly air a-gittin’ too old fur ye an’ me, Andy; she’s jes’ gittin’ mighty settled an’ old.”

A quick expression of apprehension, even dismay, flitted across his face. “What air ye a-talkin’ ’bout, Is’bel?” he

cried, in a loud, reprehensive voice. "I be four year older 'n Marcelly. 'Gittin' too old fur ye an' me'!" he mimicked ungraciously. "Puttin' we-uns tergether, ez ef *we-uns* war of an age, whenst I be old enough ter be yer gran'dad, chile!" He made another active throw with the knife, holding one ear with one hand, and flinging the blade from the other ear with a marked dexterity.

When he glanced up Isabel had risen, and waited to catch his eye. "I'm goin' in the house," she remarked, with sour dignity. "I be 'feard ye mought bite me."

He would have been glad of the riddance had it been vouchsafed, but it was an empty threat, or rather promise, for the little girl still lingered, leaning against a post of the porch; nevertheless, it served him for another ground of complaint.

"Ye hev all done got sot agin me hyar," he said, "even Is'bel. Ez ter Mis' Strobe, she never war hurt with perliteness, nohow; leastways not ter me. An' you-uns all think heap o' Clem Sanders, I reckon, don't ye?" He looked up appealingly.

A smile rippled across Marcella's face; her red lips parted. Had she indeed grown so very old, after all? But the alert Isabel answered:—

"I dunno what ye 'low we-uns be so admirin' o' Clem fur, 'thout we wanted him fur a ornamint, like that thar plaster rooster what dad brung granny from Colb'ry ter set on the mankle-shelf. Clem sets ez still an' 'pears ez good-lookin' ez he kin, jes' like the rooster do. Both o' 'em seem like they mought crow toler'ble loud ef they would, but nare one 'of 'em do."

The "frequent visitor" was in a measure appeased. He laughed mightily at this ridicule of his rival, and then sighed deeply, partly for relief and partly for self-pity.

Isabel caught the approving expression in his eyes as they met hers, and she relented from her intention of leaving the young people together, and once more kindly sat down be-

tween them. She seemed, however, disposed to earn her welcome, for as she clasped her lithe, sunburned hands over her knees, and turned her pointed chin reflectively upwards, and cast a glance toward the forge, the preternatural wisdom of her expression intensified by the two sharp eyes set so close together, she continued: "Las' time Clem kem a-visitin'," — she made no doubt it was partly to see herself and partly her "granny," as well as Marcella, — "he jes' sot up ez mum ez ye ever see ennybody, like he war 'feard o' we-uns," — her lips curled in relish, — "an' said 'Yes'm,' an' 'Ma'am,' an' 'No'm,' ter *me*, ez well ez ter granny; ez respectful, an' humble, an' 'feard o' me ez ef *I* war eighty year old."

"Oh, ho! ho!" laughed the merry "frequent visitor."

"Shet up, Is'bel," the elder sister mechanically admonished her.

"'Feard o' gals," pursued Isabel, in the pleasing consciousness of making herself very agreeable. "An' he say nuthin' 'ceptin' ter agree with everybody, an' look so mild an' meek. An' granny, she talked, an' I talked; an' Marcella, she talked some, too. An' Clem, he say, 'Yes'm' an' 'Naw'm.' An' he stayed, an' stayed, an' stayed, mighty late; till whenst he war a-goin' away, granny, she say ter him, 'Ye mus' kem agin, Clem. Me an' the gals hev mighty nigh ez interestin' a time a-settin' up with ye ez ef ye war a corpse. We'll watch with ye whenst ye air dead, Clem. Ye need n't be 'feard. We will hev got so used ter settin' alongside o' ye an' yer dumb ways ez we will be plumb trained ter it. Kem up agin soon, Clem, else we-uns will git our hands out.'"

It was pleasant to hear the "frequent visitor's" laughter, so jovial a sound it was. And how his heart warmed to Mrs. Strobe!

"Ain't she smart, though! My stars! she's ez smart ez enny man!" he exclaimed, in the hyperbole of his enthusiasm. "What did Clem say?"

"He say 'Yes'm,' " cried Isabel, with a jocund outburst. She was in high feather because of her success. Andy Longwood was far more entertaining to her when he was in this hilarious humor, instead of the pathetic sentimental moods which he had of late affected. She was evidently going on to improve her advantage, when Marcella remonstrated.

"I can't abide," she said, "ter hear ennybody laffed at ahint thar backs. It don't 'pear right ter me."

Longwood's hair was tossed backward, like the mane of an angry horse ; he looked up, with a flushing cheek. "Ye mean ter say, Marcelly, ez I be 'feard ter laff at Clem Sanders ter his face? Now I ain't, fur I hev done it a many a time."

"An' me, too," protested Isabel, with arrogant temerity, as if this were important. "I laffed at him las' time he war hyar."

"I ain't sayin' ye war afeard, Andy." Marcella sought to soothe his wounded feelings. "It jes' 'pears ter me sorter deceitful."

"Shucks!" cried the capable Isabel. "Clem's powerful deceitful hisse'f. So mealy-mouthed hyar ye'd think he war a lam', or jes' a mild deedie or suthin'; but pass by that thar forge, sir, an' ye kin hear him hollerin' a mile off, an' talkin' like a plumb coffee-mill, — elbowin' an' jostlin' the men about, the headin'est one o' the lot! Tuk Jube, the pa'son's son, one day, sir, an' put him in a sack, an' with all them foolish fellers a-followin' he kerried sack, Jube, an' all down ter the shallow spread o' the ruver, an' flung him in. But Clem's hollerin' that time war n't ekal ter Jube's ez he kem out the bag an' waded ashore. Then Clem, he kems up hyar lookin' like — like pie, he's so good an' desirable. Can't tell me nuthin' 'bout that thar gamesome Clem, an' I'll laff at him all I'm a mind ter."

Andy Longwood's variable spirits had again declined. He was moodily appreciative of the fact that these robust

pranks were not subject for ridicule in the same degree as the burly blacksmith's quaking humility and tongue-tied meekness in the presence of his lady-love and her feminine relations. The bluff, blustery fun which he relished was not without its fascinations to the boy-lover, and induced an emulative grudging. He realized, too, the possibility that Clem's bold freedom among men might contrast favorably, in Marcella's estimation, with the solicitous cowardice that she alone could inspire in that doughty heart, and he looked with lowering antagonism at Isabel, as if she had recited some noble exploit of his rival's, calculated to put him at a disadvantage and destroy his prospects.

"Oh, yes, Is'bel, ye saw it, I reckon," he sneered, with a sudden gust of temper. "Ye kin see mos' ennythin', ef ye be jes' willin' ter take half on trest. I'll be bound he hed a dog or suthin' in that sack, an' ye saw Jube arterward. Clem could n't tote Jube. Ye jes' saw Jube wadin'."

"Naw, 't war jes' ez I say," Isabel hastily insisted.

"Waal, hev it so, — hev it so." Longwood waved off the discussion. "Look out right smart enny clear night, an' ye 'll see the man in the moon wadin' down in them shallows."

"Shucks!" said Isabel, discarding the consideration, as it were, of the man in the moon, and thinking that Longwood was disposed to talk to her as if she were a very small child.

He sat quite silent then, the light wind blowing his long hair back amongst the sere and yellow vines. There was no serenity, as of yore, in his eyes, and Marcella was moved to vaguely pity him. She glanced down at him once or twice as she spun, and then away to the purple mountains beyond the hazy valley, rich with golden drapings, tissues of the sunshine that seemed some splendid textile thing, so palpable was its effect. The lilac aster trembled in the stir of the wind. The wild turkey called from the woods. All the burrs of the great chestnut by the gate had opened to the summons of the frost, and now and again as the branches

shook, the glossy nuts fell to the roots of the tree. She saw adown the moist, dank path a garter-snake, lying, half torpid, lured out by the treacherous sun and chilled by the autumn blast. Somewhere a cricket shrilled and shrilled.

"Air the season for'ard over ter Chilhowee, Andy?" she asked.

"Dunno. Don't keer. Wisht Chilhowee war leveled with the ground."

"Dell-law!" exclaimed Isabel, astonished by this ebullition of perversity, and disposed to comment profusely. Mrs. Strobe, however, opportunely called her from within to some domestic duty, and the suffering Longwood felt it a release.

"Marcelly," he said earnestly, making the most of his opportunity, "ye an' me useter be powerful friendly, an' I hed ruther kem hyar a-visitin' than in the courts o' heaven. An' ye useter laff an' be glad ter see me. An' me an' ye, an' sometimes Is'bel," — alas, how often Isabel, for all he put it thus politely, — "useter sit in the orcherd an' eat apples, an' go fishin', an' sometimes jes' talk on the porch; an' now all them times air gone!"

"Ain't we talkin' on the porch now?" demanded Marcella.

"Not like in them days: ye sca'cely notice now whether I kem or don't kem; ye pay jes' ez much 'tention ter me ez ef I war that thar old dog o' mine. G'way Watch!" he broke off suddenly, "I ain't talkin ter you-uns. I wisht yer throat war cut!" He held back with one stalwart hand his canine follower, who upon the mention of the word "dog" had come up and offered to lick his face. "Ye air lookin' over my head, Marcelly, an' ye 'low I be sech a fool ez not ter know it. Yit we hev been raised tergether. An' I remembers how I hev listened, a-comin' down the turn-row, ter hear ye call out, sweeter 'n a mocking-bird's singin', 'Look, Is'bel, yander's Andy.' I'd ruther hear it 'n the voice o' the Lord! Ye need n't look at me like that. I'd jes' ez soon go ter hell ez not — I hev done gone ter hell, ef



ye ain't goin' ter keer nuthin' 'bout'n me. Oh, Lord, I can't learn nuthin' mo' 'bout brimstone an' fire in the next worl'. I hev felt 'em in this."

"I ain't goin' ter keer nuthin' 'bout onchristian folks," remarked Marcella, "an' none ez use cuss words an' talk 'bout 'hell.'"

She spoke stiffly and with an averted eye, but when he had turned his head away she looked down kindly and leniently at him.

He suddenly glanced up. "Air it this all-fired Christian, Teck Jepson, ez hev sot ye agin me?" he asked suspiciously.

"Him ez flung my father down, an' rid over him, an' bruk his skull, an'" — She could say no more; the sobs were in her throat, her eyes were full of tears.

"Don't cry, Marcella," he said sympathetically, and he was silent for a moment in respect for her grief. Then he renewed his insistent pleas. "Marcella," he demanded, "air thar ennybody ez ye know ez I ain't 'quainted with?" Who could say how Fate might play the trickster? He felt his hands were feeble as he sought to control the possibilities.

It might have been that his words recalled the stranger who had brought such peace and ease to her father, that night of storm and trial. It might have been that he was already in her thoughts. His image in the vicissitudes of that night, now in the lurid and fluctuating illumination of the forge, now as he quelled the frenzy of the wounded man, distinct in the white gleams of the lighted cabin, became vividly present with her. She did not hesitate. She believed he was a fugitive from the law, but whether he had done ill, or whether he was falsely suspected, he should not be hurt by aught that she might say. She sought, however, to summon as innocent a duplicity as she might, for was she not a "perfessin' member"?

"What makes ye ask sech a question ez that, Andy? Ye 'pear bereft."

"I know," cried the young fellow wildly, "ez ye think 'bout somebody nowadays in the time whenst ye useter think 'bout'n me!"

"Why, Andy!" exclaimed Marcella, laughing, and blushing for the arrogations of his 'woe. "I never did think 'bout you-uns, ef the truth war knowed."

"Ye did! Ye did! I useter know it 'way over yander ter Chilhowee, kase I'd feel so happy, so happy, whilst a-plowin', or choppin' wood, or a-pullin' fodder. I would n't hev swapp'd places with a n'angel. Ye used ter think 'bout *me* then, an' now ye think 'bout somebody else."

She said nothing, and he leaned back against the post of the porch, looking up at the far crystalline sky, deeply blue; but one scant cloud was visible, of a dazzling opaque whiteness in its central mass, and with tenuous trailing cirrus effects upon its verges. It pained his eyes, and he pulled his hat-brim over his brow as he lowered his head.

"I tell you what, — I wisht I war a Injun." He glanced up at her, in the hope that she would ask why. But her wheel still whirled, her little foot, with its low-cut shoe, visible on the treadle. Her bright, downcast eyes were fixed upon the thread that her deft fingers drew out in endless attenuations. "I wisht I war a Injun," he reiterated, "so ez I would n't know 't war murder an' a scandalous sin ter kem down hyar from Chilhowee in the night-time an' scalp every hearty single man in the Settlemint, — scalp 'em an' stab 'em, I would. I wisht I did n't know no better 'n that. I wisht I war a Injun."

Her thread broke. The wheel ceased to revolve. She looked at him with reprehensive eyes.

"Andy Longwood," she remonstrated, "ye air gittin' ter be gredgin' an' mean, — an' ye ain't tellin' the truth, nuther. Ye don't wish no sech foolishness, an' ye would n't scalp nobody. Ye air jes' gredgin' an' mean."

"I gredge you-uns ter enny o' 'em," he replied. Then, after a moment, "Look-a-hyar, Marcella Strobe," — he

adopted in turn the solemnity of the full name in addressing her, —“how often hev ye promised ter marry me?”

“Not lately,” she declared.

“No, not lately, an’ that ’s jes’ what I ’m a-talkin’ ’bout. Lord! Lord! I kin ’member jes’ ez well how ye useter look when ye fust tuk ter toddlin’ round, an’ folks useter tell me then ez how ye an’ me would marry some day; an’ I b’lieved ’em, pore fool! An’ so did you-uns, though. Ye useter promise ez soon ez ye could talk ez ye would marry me. Ye useter promise even arter ye war ez old ez Is’bel, an’ arterward, too.”

“Waal, Is’bel ain’t so very old,” observed her sister calmly.

“An’ all of a suddint,” continued the young lover, “ye got tongue-tied, an’ would n’t say it yerse’f, an’ would n’t let nobody say it ter you-uns.”

“Waal, Andy, I hev fund out better sence then. Promisin’ ter marry air a mighty serious matter.”

“’T ain’t; promisin’ ter marry me air a mighty cheerful, safe thing! Knowin’ me like ye do! Ef ye war a-promisin’ ter marry some o’ these deceitful folks ez kem hyar in thar saaft comp’ny manners, an’ then go cavortin round the Cove like a demented blacksmith; or folks ez hev got Christian talk fairly a-wobblin’ all ’round ’em, an’ yit all Brum-saidge air afeard ter say a word whilst they air ridin’ folks down, — off’cers o’ the law an’ sech, — ’t would be a mighty serious matter, an’ a heap mo’ serious ter keep enny sech promise.”

He looked at her triumphant in the fullness of his logic; but alas! what has love to do with logic?

The futility of all his fine reasoning was borne in upon him with a dreary accession of heartache and a determination of energy to his temper.

“But ye air in love with some o’ ’em, Marcelly, an’ ye air jes’ foolin’ me. Naw, ye won’t even take the trouble ter try ter fool me, — I ain’t wuth it. Ye air in love with some

o' 'em, else why air ye so solemn? It's enough ter make ye solemn, though the Lord knows."

She had not recommenced her spinning; she was looking at him with a remonstrant, smiling expression, as if she might thus coax him from his boyish wrath, when suddenly her eyes filled, her lips trembled.

He rose, quivering at the sight of her agitation. "I'll find out which one of 'em 't is that ye air goin' ter marry, Marcell, an' I'll go down yander inter the Settlemint an' scatter what he calls his brains all 'round his anvil. Air it Clem Sanders? Air ye goin' ter marry Clem?"

"I ain't solemn fur Clem Sanders," she sobbed, half laughing; then, with a gush of tears, "I hev got a heap besides ter make me solemn."

"Tell me who it is that ye air goin' ter marry," — he touched the trigger of his rifle, with a fierce elation in his eye; "it's loaded fur *him*."

Marcella suddenly lifted her head, as if listening. She rose precipitately. "Jes' go 'long, now, Andy. Ye hev been hyar a long time. Go home, an' I'll tell ye ennythin' ye want ter know nex' time ye kem. Jes' g'long, like a good boy."

"He stared, motionless, amazed at her pale face and agitated manner. Then he too heard a step within. "He's in the house," he exclaimed, "a-talkin' 'long o' Mis' Strobe an' Is'bel! An' ye wanted me ter go 'way 'thout seein' him. I know ye now, Marcell, an' I'll stay. I won't be druv off; I'll stay, an' " — His hand once more sought the trigger of his rifle, as his blazing eyes fixed upon the door whence the sound of the step proceeded. A hesitating step it was, and slow.

And then Eli Strobe appeared, and Longwood saw him for the first time since his illness. The young man recoiled from the shock, his angry insistent face smitten with a sudden gravity, even awe. So forlorn and spectral was Eli Strobe, with his pallid, lantern-jawed face; his half-shaven

head, still bandaged; his clothes, his very skin, hanging loosely on his big bones. He cast his old familiar sidelong glance at the young fellow, freighted with evident but surly recognition, and he had the dumb, pathetic, shambling dignity that one sometimes discerns in a wounded animal, as with frequent halts he tottered up to an armchair on the porch, in which his deft-handed daughters made haste to prop him with pillows and wrap him with blankets. He muttered something vaguely about "them leetle darters," and then he sat quite still, looking off at the purple mountains, and the golden sunshine on the red and amber woods hard by, the aspect of the whole world changed since he saw it last.

The young fellow, still staring, had sunk down upon the porch in his former attitude, wondering if indeed there were no one else within; why, then, had Marcella sought to hurry him away? She had settled herself again at her spinning-wheel, watching with a tremulous smile the clumsy antics of Longwood's dog, courtier enough to display great joy upon the reappearance of the master of the house, and leaping about his chair, now and then emitting a short, shrill bark.

"Fust time I hev been out, Andy," observed Eli Strobe.

Marcella stopped her wheel to listen. She seemed to hang with doubt and anxiety upon his every word. Longwood, summoning a show of self-possession and cordiality, remarked that the air was likely to do him good. "Ye 'pear ter be gittin' well now," he added encouragingly.

"Yes," assented Eli Strobe good-humoredly. "Mam an' Marcelly an' Is'bel, though, hev mighty near killed me with kindness. 'T war mighty hard fur me ter start out ter git well. I felt like I'd fairly enjye stayin' sick fur a livin'. An' that thar old doctor, — I actially b'lieves he hev gin me all the med'cine he hev got. The rest of 'em in the Cove hed better not git sick soon; no mo' doctor-stuff whar that kem from."

Andy Longwood laughed in an embarrassed fashion, by

way of making an appropriate response. Some crows — they seemed very black — were cawing loudly from the top of a full-leaved hickory-tree, that blazed a resplendent, illuminated yellow down by the fence; all the breadth of the sere cornfield hard by was doubly pallid in tint, in contrast with this flaring ochreous splendor; the sky was an intenser blue where the foliage was imposed upon its expanse, the farthest mountains duskily purple, while below the branches of the tree, near to the great dark bole, the roofs of the Settlement showed, the glimmer of the frost on the eaves not altogether spent, albeit the sun was high, the curling tendrils of smoke, blue, and misty, and timorous, as they crept out of the clay-and-stick chimneys.

Eli Strobe's eyes dwelt on the little hamlet for a moment. "What's the folks in the Settlement a-sayin' 'bout me; Andy?" he asked unexpectedly. "I ain't seen nobody but the gals an' mam, ez dunno nuthin' 'bout folks, an' politics, an' sech things ez a body wants ter hear 'bout; an' the old doctor, ez seems ter be a good, useful kind o' consarn, but 'pears ter think a man oughter set still all day an' study 'bout'n his liver, stiddier politics an' his office what he hev done been 'lected ter hold, an' will de-strac' his mind ef he gits ter thinkin' 'bout enny sech ez them. Actially, I b'lieve that old man would hev hed me darnin' stockin's, ef I hed n't made a stan' agin him. I tried ter spound a pint o' law ter him t'other day, an' he seemed ter take a fit till he got me ter talkin' 'bout craps an' gyardin truck, — turnips, an' inguns, an' sech, ez I don't keer nuthin' 'bout. I hain't hearn nuthin' 'bout the returns o' the 'lection 'n' nuthin'. What air they sayin' 'bout'n me in the Settlement, Andy?"

The young man was about to respond, when Marcella precipitately forestalled him: —

"They don't say nuthin' nor do nuthin' in this Settlement. Brumsaidge air the lonesomest place in these hyar mountings. Sech kerryin's-on they hev, though, in Pio-

mingo Cove! An' t'other night they hed a dancin'-party over on Chilhowee."

"Whar'bouts?" cried Andy Longwood, with a poignant note of surprise, deprivation, and despair. "I never hearn nuthin' 'bout'n it. I dunno why they never invited me," he added, with surly resentment. As he gazed up at her, he could not interpret the glance of scorn and reproach that she cast upon him. Then she did not lift her eyes again, but busied herself in her spinning, while Eli Strobe, catching at the subject, logically descanted upon the sin of dancing, and described with a fervid imagination the experiences which its votaries would encounter in the next world as retribution. The "frequent visitor" hardly listened, so mystified was he by the taunt of Marcella's glance and the news of the airy pleasuring on Chilhowee, in his own neighborhood, in which he had been, for some unimagined reason, debarred from participating. If it were not so inexplicable, he might have believed that she had invented the circumstance, and relied upon his tact to confirm her statement, and thus set Eli Strobe off on a theological hobby. He wondered, hearing vaguely of fiery furnaces and furious brimstone, if the doctor considered this a pleasing and wholesome subject of contemplation. It might have lasted longer if the polemic had had a stronger opposition. Marcella sought to furnish this, but paternal tenderness rendered her effort of no avail.

"Of course I ain't talkin' 'bout ye dancin' at the party las' Christmus, Marcelly. Did ye think I mcant that fur you-uns? That war wunst in a while, — a leetle dancin' an' fun, jes' wunst in a while."

For there are exceptions to every zealot's cherished theory of damnation, and the imminent terrors of hell must be abrogated in favor of one's own.

And thus the discourse came to an end. "Andy," he said, breaking off abruptly, "hev ye hearn ennybody in the Cove 'low ez I war ter blame?"

Once more Marcella looked at her youthful lover, her eyes dilated, pleading. He began to understand that there was more here than appeared upon the surface, and he wished that he had been guided by her monitions and had taken his leave. He gazed at her earnestly, desirous of saying what she wanted him to say; but he could read naught in her eyes save her remonstrance, fear, and reproach. And yet he must answer.

"I hev hearn some," he faltered, dolorously truthful.

"Waal, they hain't got no right ter blame me," retorted Eli Strobe. His color had risen; his eyes flashed. "I'll be bound, though, — cowardly curs! — they don't dare ter do nuthin' but talk; they ain't got the grit ter try ter set the law onter *me*! They jes' set 'round at the store an' the forge, an' bob thar hats tergether, an' whisper, an' talk, an' talk." He grimaced with a mimicry of secrecy and malice, and bobbed his own head with an alacrity that made the young fellow wince, remembering the reports of how variously his skull was fractured, and seeing the way in which it was presumably bound together.

Marcella was spinning again with feverish industry; the wheel whirled fast, — so fast, and its whirl was continuous and loud.

"Naw, sir; they don't dare call *me* ter account ter the law fur killin' Teck Jepson. *Naw, sir!*" Eli Strobe reiterated, with a deep, rotund voice. Suddenly, with an incidental manner and a clear, casual glance, "Whar did they bury him, Andy?"

The young man sat mute and dumfounded. The blood rushed violently to his head, and the landscape reeled before him. He had scant time to realize the emergency, as the recognition of the state of affairs dawned upon his bewildered intelligence, and to canvass within himself what answer he had best make.

"I dunno," he faltered. "I be so constant over ter Chilhowee," he added, gathering his faculties.



"Ain't ye never hearn, though, whar they buried him?" Eli persisted, with growing pertinacity. "I did n't 'low ez 't war you-uns ez preached the fun'ral sermon," with an angry sneer and his side-glance of bovine surliness.

"Why," said Marcella, with a matter-of-course manner, "I'll tell ye: they buried him up yander in that thar leetle buryin'-groun' by his old cabin, whar his folkses' graves be."

Her father fixed a keen, suspicious eye on her.

"Ye did n't know yestiddy," he commented severely.

Not even the crafty watchfulness of mania, not Andy Longwood's sanity, could detect aught amiss or unnatural in her tones and manner as she drew out her thread, and once more set the wheel a-whirling before she replied.

"Naw; Clem Sanders 't war ez told it ter me, when he kem ter inquire arter ye, las' night. I axed him."

Andy Longwood understood now that the family systematically agreed with Eli Strobe and humored his strange delusion, lest they might excite him to his detriment, and that these were the directions of the physician. He did not fail to note that it was with his rival's name that she sought to aid her forlorn enterprise, and that she no longer turned to him for help. "I reckon Clem an' nobody else would hev been sech a fool ez me," he angrily reproached himself. He was eager enough to go now, but his liberty had fled. The invalid had fixed earnest eyes upon him, and showed a continuous desire to talk; he could only sit and listen, with the cruel consciousness of how every distraught word grated upon the tender heart of Marcella. He realized now how she had sought to shield from notice the calamity of her father's loss of mind, and how he had thwarted her.

"Waal — waal! buried him thar, did they? Teck's gone!" A shade — a symptom of remorse — crossed his face. "He 's in the grave whar he tried ter put me. Mighty narrer place, folks, mighty narrer, fur ennybody ez hev lived in the worl' an' got used ter seein' the sky." He drew a

long sigh, and mournfully shook his head. "An' he war a good man in the main — Look-a-hyar, Marcellly," he broke off abruptly, her half-repressed sob catching his attention, "what ye cryin' fur? It's whar he tried ter put me! An' ye see, Andy, they can't do nuthin' ter me, kase I war a off'cer o' the law in the discharge o' my jewty. I war obligated ter arrest Teck, an' I pulled him out'n his saddle an' bruk his neck. Ye don't b'lieve it, Marcellly?" He looked at her with a flashing, challenging eye, the red and angry blood rushing suddenly over his pale face. "Ye said ye did n't, yestiddy."

"Waal, that war yestiddy," the girl urged soothingly.

"Ye see, Andy, ef Teck hed killed me whenst he rid me down, 't would be murder, kase I war off'cer o' the law, arrestin' him whilst gamblin'. Hoss-racin' on a public road air gamblin', though ye might n't think it, Andy. Ye young folks air so sodden in sin ye dunno right from wrong. Buried him up yander on the mounting-side, 'mongst his folkses' graves. Waal — waal! They need n't try ter hold me 'sponsible, kase they can't. Hev ye hearn ennythin' 'bout his harnt bein' viewed, an' sech? Fraish-buried folks walk sometimes, they say; leastwise till they git used ter bein' under the groun', or wharever they hev gone ter. But I hev never hearn tell o' none o' them ez hev been dead a consider'ble time gittin' a-goin', — none o' the old folks, dead fifty year ago an' better, an' none o' them Injuns now out'n that thar Injun buryin'-groun' way up on Sing-Song Creek. Whoever see a Injun harnt? Shucks! 't would make me laff. I reckon them folks hed no souls, ef the truth war knowed. Ye ever see a Injun harnt?"

"Naw, sir," replied Andy. "Them Injuns over ter Quallatown air plenty dead enough fur me!" He laughed constrainedly as he made the admission, for the sight of Eli Strobe, lean, and pale, and grizzly, with his overgrown beard, and his tangled hair, and bandaged head, was not reassuring, as he sat and discussed his ghastly subject.

“I jes’ study ‘bout Teck Jepson all the time. I kin jes’ see how he looked whenst I got him down on the road under his horse’s hoofs. He bled a heap.” He said this with a certain relish. Then he looked curiously at a dark stain on his coat-sleeve, and was silent for a moment. “I wisht I knowed what he said whenst he got ter Torment.” He winked feebly at Longwood, unnoticing that the young man winced. “I wisht I knowed ef he walks.”

It was waxing close upon noon. The shadows had gradually dwindled. The world was so still. The sunshine lay on the splendid slopes in languorous reverie. Here and there some winged thing whisked about in the fine soft radiance, miraculously escaping the frost, or gallantly withstanding it, like certain human antiques, prolonging the sentiment and fervor of a summertide, albeit they cannot stay it.

Marcella’s attention pensively followed the airy zigzags of those unconquered wings; the little wheel was still; her hands had fallen passive at last in her lap. Andy was once more meditating departure. He straightened out his limbs as he sat, and he lifted his head and looked about him. The next moment he glanced up at Marcella with an expression of startled, anxious inquiry. Her eyes were already riveted upon the turn-row, where amidst the pallid corn Teck Jepson was slowly coming toward the house.

### XIII.

It was one of those moments charged with the realization of a weighty emergency, when the mind shrinks from the responsibility of discriminating in the crisis, and would fain leave the event to ensue unchecked. Marcella sat as still as if she were merely a figure painted on the pale yellow background of the sere mass of clambering vines that clung to the porch on which the salient coloring of her dark blue dress, the red kerchief about her throat, her brown floating hair, her widely open brown eyes, the fresh flesh tints of her face and hands, stood out with an effect delicate, yet intense. The little rough gray spinning-wheel at her knee was distinctly marked, too, for its humble neutrality of tone was aided by contrast, as well as the ashen brownish hue of the old hound's head. Perhaps it was the expression of her face, instinct with expectation, that arrested her father's fluctuating attention. He looked at her, bewildered for a moment; then he turned slowly in his chair, and with his deliberate sidelong glance sought to follow the direction of her eyes.

He saw the approaching figure; there could be no doubt of that. The cornstalks, all bleached and partially stripped of the wealth of blades that the summer's suns had drawn out, like a conjurer's ribbon flaunting from nothingness, to wave in the summer's winds, — the residue, tattered and mildewed, glittering here and there with the white rime, — came hardly to Jepson's breast. The broad shoulders of his blue jeans coat showed above the growth; his wide white hat, set far back from his brow, disclosed his features, with their distinctive chiseling. The peculiar pose of his head

and his erect carriage were so characteristic that he could hardly be mistaken even at a distance. His eyes were fixed upon the group, and he must have noted Eli Strobe holding to the arms of his chair, his bandaged head bent forward, gazing open-mouthed, with quivering jaw and pallid, stricken face. He certainly saw Marcella, and his step slackened as he watched her suddenly rise and stand behind her father, placing one finger on her lip. She lifted the other hand at arm's-length, and with a frowning, imperative face she waved him back. He stood motionless for a moment, hesitating and at a loss. Then he walked on slowly, still toward the house. There was a dip in the ground just in front of him, — a marshy spot, — and there the corn had grown tall and rank ; so tall that the sere and half-stripped stalks, left to stand stark and dead in the field till the spring burnings and plowings-under should grant them sepulchre, reached higher than Teck Jepson's head. Eli Strobe, tremulously intent, watched the great white hat disappear behind these relics of the lush crop ; he waited motionless, his eyes fixed upon the lower stalks where it should presently emerge. Time went by, — one minute, three, five, — and still Jepson did not reappear. Andy Longwood divined that he had turned aside upon Marcella's signal, and had taken his way along the furrows between the corn, out of sight, and so to the verge of the field. But this was not the impression made upon the distraught brain of the constable, as, his patience wearying at last and his muscles failing, he sank back into his chair. He looked craftily at the two young people, to judge what effect the apparition — for thus he deemed it — had had upon them ; if indeed it had appeared save to his own eyes. In their uncertainty, dealing with the emergency at haphazard and as best they might, they unwittingly fostered his delusion. Marcella was calmly spinning once more, and Andy Longwood, taking his cue at last, idly whittled a stick.

For some time no word was spoken. Strobe, gasping for

breath, ever and again looked fearfully over his shoulder to where the languid autumnal sunshine lay still and vacant upon the expanse of the pallid corn. Pilgrims were abroad in the blue sky, and now and then a wild weird cry floated down from migratory birds, sometimes unseen, and sometimes visible only in the tiny converging lines bespeaking the files of the wild geese, all a-journeying. When wings not afar off, with a silken rustle and gleams of living light, came cleaving the sunshine and dimpling the waters of the shallows of the river, he showed a momentary interest to see the wild ducks settle and rise again, as the crack of a gun told that a death-charged missile had pierced their ranks. He glanced mechanically after their flight as with clamorous cries they took to wing. And then he did not forget to gaze once more upon the curtaining corn where that significant figure had disappeared. A gray squirrel scudded along the rail fence, then across the door-yard, with a large hickory-nut in his mouth, and vanished up the bole of the chestnut-tree, making small account of the old hound, who simply growled in an undertone, his eyes bright and liquid and his ears pricked up. The wounded man's heavy-lidded eyes followed with a twinkle the whisking squirrel. "Ye ain't a-goin' hongry this winter, air ye, bubby? I'll be bound ye be a reg'lar high liver, ef the truth war knowed."

Marcella took note of the easy, natural tone. She drew a long sigh of relief. The tense, feverish spark had died out of her eyes; they were pensively bright, as she fixed them smilingly upon her father. She believed that her quick resource had taken effect. He had seen Teck Jepson, certainly, but she thought that at the distance he could not have recognized him, and that she had averted the calamity which the sudden entrance upon the scene of the man whom he supposed dead would surely have precipitated. He might have been shocked into a relapse of his ravings and his violent mania, from which perhaps he would never have emerged again.

"An' the doctor say, 'Keep him quiet,' " she muttered.

The sunshine, and the air, and the wonderful balsamic freshness and buoyancy that seemed to pervade it, all had a tonic effect on Eli Strobe. His color became more natural, his eye was calmer, the blood in his veins seemed charged with his own bold identity. He began to feel his courage.

"I ain't afeard o' nuthin'," he remarked triumphantly, suddenly pursuing aloud the tenor of his thoughts. His daughter stopped and stared, crest-fallen, since he seemed again incoherent. "I never war afeard o' no livin' man, an' I ain't a-goin' ter set out at my time o' life ter git skeered at harnts. I war a-tellin' ye jes' now 'bout mebbe Teck Jepson's harnt mought set out ter walk. Ef he tuk ter foolin' round me, I'd jes' ax him, 'What kin ye do? What kin ye do?'" He put both hands on his knees and wagged his head from side to side, casting up that characteristic sidelong glance, as if thus defying and confronting the supposed spectre. "'Ye could n't do nuthin' ter me whilst live an' hearty. An' I ain't a-goin' ter be afeard o' ye now ye air dead. Ef ye kem a-tromplin' round hyar, I'll arrest ye, — I'll sarve papers on ye. I'm constable o' Brumsaidge yit!'"

Once more he turned abruptly, and looked out over the emptiness of the cornfield. Then he leaned back in his chair, and this idea of serving papers on the "harnt" came over him anew, and seemed to amuse him mightily. Now and again he muttered, "I'll sarve papers on ye," and chuckled slyly to himself. "I'll sarve papers on ye, till ye'll be glad ter stay in yer grave, writ proof."

"This hyar Jepson," — he spoke aloud, leaning forward with his elbows on his knees, and assuming that sly, confidential air characteristic of the rustic gossip, as he looked from one to the other of the young people, — "he tried powerful hard ter make up ter me in his last days, though I know he never used ter like me much, kase I war cousin

ter M'ria White, ez married Ben Bowles, an' put her up ter gittin' a powerful good trade out'n Teck whenst he went ter live with them, — an' ginerally kase I war kin ter M'ria. An' I'll 'low myse'f M'ria air a pritty stiff one ter stan'. Some folks useter think mebbe I mought marry M'ria myse'f, me bein' a widower ; but I say, ' Naw, sir ! I ain't a-goin' ter hev my pleasure at the jedgmint day plumb destroyed by hevin' ter go ter heaven with two wimmen a-clawin' an' tearin' each other's hair an' golden harps 'bout which one owned me ! Thanky ! One wife's enough. Mought be said ter be a plenty.' ” He laughed with his heavy bass rumble. “ But I want ter tell ye 'bout Teck,” he went on, lapsing into his tone of urgent mystery. “ Oh, I tell ye, in his las' days he made up ter me, — Teck could be ez smooth an' slick ez a bullet when he wanted ter ; an' what fur, do ye reckon ? Why, fur Marcelly. He war bound ter find favior in her eyes, so, knowin' she set a heap o' store by her dad's opinion, he undertook ter git mighty friendly with *Me* ! ”

He was addressing himself now to Andy Longwood, whose expression had changed from pity and embarrassed anxiety to keen and alert interest. The young fellow's face was flushed ; he had drawn himself into a tense listening position as he sat on the step ; as he turned his head eagerly upward, his light, curling hair fell down longer still upon his broad shoulders beneath the wide brim of his hat, set far back. He had the greater interest in what was to come because he began to realize that Eli Strobe was perfectly sane except in regard to the circumstances surrounding the disaster, — his delusion concerning Teck Jepson's death and the manner of it. He simply was the victim of what is known as a “ fixed idea.” On other topics his mind seemed even more alert and lucid than formerly, possibly because of that freshened interest in life characteristic of the invalid returning to the world after an interval of seclusion. He was more talkative than was his wont, and in relaxing his reserve he had lost that very glutinous quality, his policy,



which usually serves to hold together what men really think, and prevent it from melting into speech, which is often the reverse of what men think.

"An' I did n't know what in the name o' Aberham ter do!" continued Eli Strobe, with uncharacteristic communicativeness. "Me runnin' fur election, an' this hyar man a-courtin' round Marcelly. An' he hed hearn mam accidentally 'low ez Marcelly despised him, so I hed ter be powerful keerful, kase I did n't want him ter vote agin me fur constable. That war the main pint. Young folks kin git married or stay single, whichever seems the foolishhest ter 'em; that's what they always do, — the foolishhest. But ye can't git 'lected ter office by jes' wantin' ter. Ef ye ain't 'lected constable, *ye can't be constable*. But ef ye can't git one gal, ye air mighty apt ter git another; they ain't all o' one mind. An' I did n't want the young folks's foolishness 'bout fallin' in love ter oust me out'n my office. Kase Teck Jepson air mighty robustious, an' ef he hed tuk a notion ter work agin me in the election he 'd hev done it with a will. So when he 'd say suthin' 'bout Marcelly, I 'd say, 'Thar's plenty o' time fur me ter choose a son-in-law, Teck, an' I mus' say candidates fur that office abound in this kentry.'" He stopped to laugh, then went on gravely: "'The outlook fur sons-in-law is promisin'. I ain't liable ter be destitute; but I be goin' ter take my time 'bout git-tin' a son-in-law.' So Teck jes' did n't know whether I favored him or no, but war n't made mad; though I knowed all the time ez Marcelly war a-goin' ter marry Clem Sanders, — ain't ye, Marcelly?"

Andy Longwood caught his breath, as he looked up at her. There was a touch of coquetry in the glance of her eye and her mounting color, as she nodded a careless acquiescence. She would not contradict the invalid, and perchance she relished the tumult of indignation that flared, upon her gesture of affirmation, in Andy Longwood's face; for nothing concerning her old playfellow seemed a serious

matter to her. The next moment she was smiling down at him, ready to signal a negative to him, but he had turned his head resolutely away.

"Sometimes," pursued the politician, "I'd say ter Teck, whenst he talked 'bout Marcelly, I'd say, 'I'm obligated ter hev a mighty smart man fur my son-in-law, kase I hev got a darter ez hev n't got her ekal fur looks an' goodness outside o' the courts o' heaven. Kin ye read?' An' he'd say, mighty oneasy, 'Naw; what do I want ter read fur?' An' then I'd say, 'Kin ye even spell? Clem Sanders kin.' An' he'd say, 'Naw,' powerful glum, I tell ye. Then he'd be perlite fur true fur a while, — a good while. When, Andy, I'll tell ye, 'twixt ye an' me an' the gate-post, sech spellin' ez Clem Sanders kin do oughter be agin the law! It air agin every law o' spellin'. Clem oughter be hung a leetle fur each offense. It jes' fixes him in his criminal conduct agin the alphabet. Oh, ho! But Teck never knowed no better. He 'lowed I wanted a school-larned son-in-law, an' Clem war that larned man. Heigh ho! I reckon I ought n't ter hev made him so mis'able in his las' days. But I could n't abide ter git cut out'n my office kase all the young idjits in the kentry war insane 'bout Marcelly."

He leaned back in his chair once more, desisting at last, for there had begun to be an unmistakable prospect of losing his audience. Andy Longwood, who had wished to go earlier, but had found his will not adequate to the emergency, remaining helplessly embarrassed by the awkwardness of the situation which left him an unwelcome witness of the manifestation of Eli Strobe's mania, now felt the energy of his own grievances imparted to his volition by the disclosures which had chanced to be made. He was once more self-absorbed, self-centred. He hardly noticed the wounded man, or that he rose so precipitately upon the conclusion of the last sentence that it savored of the rudeness of interruption and disrespect to his elders. He could go now,

easily enough, — willingly. His face, as he stood, younger far than his muscles, callow of expression considering his height, belying his claim to the authority and respect that he arrogated as a full-grown man, was flushed, and wore that petulant importance of adolescence that falls far short of the dignity for which it strives. Marcella knew well the puerile heroics and reproaches that would have come from him had they been alone; and so much his senior was the girl, four years his junior, that she was wont to slyly laugh at him, to maternally humor his view of his own importance, and to feel very kindly toward him, for they had always been together, and he had been a merry and good-tempered playmate in the old days. He had not yet ceased to be amusing, save, poor fellow, to himself.

“I mus’ be a-goin’,” he observed, not lifting his eyes, and articulating indistinctly, for he only slightly moved his lips. She had often seen him in this mood, and ten years ago these manifestations, so familiar to her, would have preceded a wild burst of tears and a stamping of small brogans in rage. She remembered him well in this guise of youthful grief. Such seizures had passed from his recollection as if they had never been. He could not have pictured himself at any period so removed from that idea of dignified and important identity which he fancied was himself.

“We air goin’ ter dish up dinner, Andy,” she observed, alluringly. “Some o’ the late corn ain’t plumb hardened yit, an’ we air goin’ ter hev corn-puddin’. Them guinea hens ye gin me lays aigs enough fur ennythin’. Ye better stay.”

Few people in this world have the opportunity of beholding a fairer, more gracious face than that which she turned, as she bent over her wheel, and looked at him, her eyes shining and sweet, her lips smiling, showing the glittering line of her teeth.

But he kept his eyes averted.

"I don't want no dinner," he declared.

"Got above eatin', hev ye?" remarked Eli Strobe, whose affinities were essentially those of maturity, and who had scant sympathy with the callow stage of manhood. He entertained a robust contempt for its assertions and its confidence in some bigger and better future, likely to wait upon its superior capacities, than other men had attained. "Ye'll git ter heaven quicker 'n ye think fur, ef ye jes' hold out an' foller that fashion ez a constancy."

Andy lifted his eyes slightly now, with an expression of surly indignation, but mindful of his own position he said merely, "I ain't hongry." He lingered a moment still, because the mountaineers do naught precipitately; then with a deliberate "Waal, good-by," he started away.

"Andy!" cried Marcella, her voice indeed as sweet as the mocking-bird's. He turned, gloomily unappeased, stiffly obeying her behest to accord attention. He leaned upon his long rifle, as he stood in the path and looked back. She had risen, and had come to the verge of the porch; one hand was on the post, the other was held out to him. She was smiling still, and tears would have impressed him as more appropriate, — smiling easily and naturally, with a touch of jesting, ridiculing remonstrance in her manner. "I furgot. I want ter ax ye ter do me a favior — but — but — ye look so mad I be mos' afeard. Air ye mad?"

*So mad!* And this was the way she interpreted his heartbreak.

He looked with stern reproach at her, although he spoke in a gentle tone: —

"Mad? What hev I got to be mad 'bout, Marcella?"

"Nuthin'," she began.

"That don't hender, Andy," interrupted Eli Strobe, unable to refrain from taking a hand in the little game. "The maddest folks air always them ez hev got no call ter git mad."

"I war 'feard ye *mought mebbe* be mad with me," said

Marcella, still provokingly smiling, and stepping down from the porch and slowly approaching him.

The sunshine was on her bare head. The rich chestnut-brown of her hair showed such lustre and depth of color in the broad light, such gloss and fineness. And how it waved and curled as it fell down on her shoulders, with an electrical isolation of filaments toward the ends, where they seemed to lose the expression of color, and gave only cloudy, indefinite effects that left no opportunity for strong, crude lines about her head. Her fair skin was fairer still in the radiance. Her eyes were dazzled; she held one hand above them, and their expression, as she looked at him from the shadow, might have mollified aught less wrapped in self than this very young man. To him it all meant that Marcella knew that she had given cause for offense, and was wishing to make it up by laughing him out of his just indignation; for a half laugh curved her lips, and brought out a dimple in her cheek, to fluctuate there with her effort to ridicule him. She came silently, looking tall and slight, fit to be swayed even by a gentle wind, and stood beside him in the narrow path; glancing at him for a moment, then turning and gazing casually from under her hand, that still shielded her smiling eyes, now at one and then another of the great ranges, shimmering azure through the sun, save when a white cloud in the sky set a dimly purple image of itself a-scudding as impalpably over the mountains. He was impelled to speak first. He did so in a tone of grave and measured constraint, as one who will not resent, though feeling offense.

“What favior did ye wanter ax me, Marcella?”

Her eyes rested still longer on the mountains; then she fixed them on his face, altogether unmoved by his grave tone, except, perchance, to laughter. She took hold of the barrel of his rifle with her left hand.

“I want ye ter loan me this rifle o’ yourn, Andy. I want ter shoot a old hawk ez hev been a-flusterin’ round the hens an’ chickens lately.”

He stood, blankly-astonished, for a moment.

"Why n't ye borry yer dad's?" he demanded, in surly suspicion of her motives.

Once more she turned her shaded eyes upon the mountains.

"Oh, kase," she said, altogether unembarrassed by the expression of stern and serious inquiry in his eyes, "ye gin me mos' o' the chickens I hev got, an' mebbe it mought be good luck ef I war ter shoot the hawk with yer own gun."

This seemed to him perfectly reasonable, but his distrust of her was so great at the moment that he subjected the possibility of occult motives to a searching mental scrutiny. He failed to evolve anything more plausible, or indeed anything beyond what she had said. He looked at her hard for a moment, still bitterly resenting her undimmed brightness under his displeasure, and he secretly thought she had ill chosen her time to ask of him a favor. Still maintaining his gravely offended aspect, he said, "Ye kin hev it, Marcella, ez long ez ye want it." He released his hold upon it, leaving it in her hand, and went his way without another word. At the gate he did not look back, but pursued the turn-row until he was half through the field. Under some impulse then which he did not seek to discriminate, he glanced over his shoulder.

Marcella was standing in the path where he had left her, still gazing after him. She held the long rifle in one hand, leaning her soft cheek against its surly ramrod at one side of the barrel, her hair touching it. She smiled radiantly at him through the sunshine, and called out with joyous sweetness, "Good-by, Andy."

If he said aught in response, she did not hear it. Her charming smile, intent on mollification, failed of effect; it was too much, however, to expect even of feminine tact that she should appreciate that frowns might have served better, or null seriousness, inexpressive and impenetrable. The flash of light from her eyes set a-flaring his intelligence, —

a sufficiently good endowment, but lacking those traits of divination and imagination characteristic of more finely furnished brains. Without its impetus he could never have experienced an abrupt illumination concerning Marcella's motive, which opened before him by the time he had ponderingly approached the verge of the cornfield. Its contemplation almost took his breath away. He stood motionless, staring vaguely before him, realizing why she had wanted his rifle, — how strange that he had not instantly known! Had he so soon forgotten his idle threats? He had a vivid mental picture of himself as he must have looked as he stood on the porch this morning, significantly tapping the trigger of the loaded rifle. She had not thought those threats idle! His foolish courage flared up to match the estimation in which he thought she held him. She knew him for a dangerous man! — and the blood pulsed fast through his veins as this flattering idea impelled it. She was afraid he would indeed wreak woe upon the man whom she was to marry. Her father had said that she was to marry Clem Sanders, and she had not denied it. He had unconsciously disbelieved this at the time, as one cannot at first realize a misfortune, which stuns the finer sensibilities by the weight of its fall. Only now he was beginning to appreciate what her loss meant to him; it almost unmanned him for a moment, thinking as he did that it was her solicitude for the safety of her lover that devised the clever ruse to win his rival's rifle.

"'Feard I'd hurt Clem," he said with a sneer, despite his quivering lip. Perhaps it was the idea that violence was expected of him, which her precautions first suggested to him, — for the bravado and bloody-mindedness of his conversation had been utterly without intention, — that determined him upon his course.

"Naw, naw, Marcella," he said, half aloud and mournfully shaking his head, "ef not me — nobody." He leaned down as he spoke, and drew from his boot-leg a glittering

steely flash ; he looked around with a quick, apprehensive glance ; but the sere stalks of the corn, which were straggling here, so near the end of the field, would nevertheless serve to shield him from the observation of any one in the yard or the porch of the cabin. He examined the knife with fierce eyes, his teeth set hard together : the handle was strong, the metal excellently well tempered. He passed his fingers gingerly along the edge, — keen, how keen ! Clem Sanders himself had sharpened it ! He sheathed it and thrust it back into his long boot-leg, and went on taking his way down the road toward the forge, nerved by the fact that bloodshed was expected of him.

A drought had succeeded the wet weather, and the deep ruts formed by the wagon wheels in the red clay mire of the road were still stiff and hard, mementos of their slow, creaking progress ; and although here and there a thin crust crumbled under his heel, his steps left no other trace. He heard a thrush whistle from the weeds as he went. He looked up at the spaces of the broad blue sky, infinite elsewhere, but here with bounds and barriers, for the mountains limited it and made it local. He was vaguely conscious that his dog, with an affectation of loyalty to his true owner, as one might seek to cultivate a fine trait to wear as a graceful accomplishment, knowing it to be exotic to the soil, trotted at his heels, with a long, lithe stride and a sinuously moving body, a wagging tail and a nose that pretended to snuff the ground, as if solicitous for some trail of fox, or rabbit, or other gentry. His master was presently made aware of his defection by seeing the canine shadow, cast a little in advance, suddenly swerve aside, and with a deft pace and a drooping tail the hound set out swiftly for his adopted home.

“ The very dog hev gin me up,” his master muttered bitterly. Sorrow at his age is not all bitterness ; it had an element of satisfaction to be so very adequate to his sufferings and his wrongs. He mechanically turned his head to



glance after the creature, who had paused, gazing back with regret, rent with inward dissension, his poor dog-conscience struggling between his sense of duty and preference. He looked a trifle handsomer than his wont, with the animation of his emotion expressed in his slender, alert head and his bright eyes. Then, with a sudden sharp yelp that seemed to cadence the pang of decision, he betook himself swiftly away from temptation, resolved to persevere in desertion, and was soon lost to view as the turn-row swallowed him amongst the corn. The next moment Andy had forgotten that he existed. The music of the forge was on the air, the clinking of the hand-hammer and the clanking of the sledge. How the distant sound assimilated with the mountain voices, as the echoes came lilting forth to meet it! The ear might hardly distinguish the repetitions of the rock from the vibrations of the metal. Presently he could hear the anvil sing, and then the strokes seemed only marking the rhythm of this fine, tremulous, high-pitched monody. Clem Sanders was there at his work, all unsuspecting of the fate coming with long strides down the road. What strange, untimely thought was this! The muscles below Longwood's knee were suddenly sensitive to the pressure of the knife in his boot, and he was reminded of a grisly old story of a cruel man whose hand was palsied on his weapon in the moment when he would have taken a fellow-man's life. An old woman's story this, told in the dusk at the fireside, to sap away with mystery and weird lights and artful words a man's courage when he should resent his wrongs like a man; for were they not all afraid of bloodshed, these women, and cowards to their heart's core? He was dragging his left leg, for all his logic and his scorn of a pusillanimous peace. How the anvil sang, — how it sang! And why need he wonder would it be silent to-morrow, — would it ever again give forth that sonorous melody under the hand of the man who now wielded the hammer? Who talks of to-morrow? Poor fool, let him mind to-day. Was

the knife turning around in his boot? Every fibre of the limb was oppressed with its significant presence. His courage, however, did not wait upon his nerves; he saw altogether unmoved that half a dozen idle men were standing about the door of the forge, or loitering within. His pace had grown slower since that fancy about the knife had taken hold upon him, but as he made his way up the slight ascent to the door of the forge he stooped down and boldly drew out the weapon; a man in the doorway fixed a meditative eye upon him, thinking, doubtless, he had only brought the blade to have an edge put on it. Longwood could see through the dusky little place, for the window at the rear was open, and he marveled to find his senses so alert. In such a moment he thought it strange to recognize Teck Jepson, leaning against the wall, his face white since the summer sunburn had worn away, and thoughtful, and with imperative lines even in silent reverie; his hands were thrust in his leather belt, his eyes were fixed on the leafless autumn woods. Nay, Longwood took note even of the bare brambles of the wild rose outside of the window, its profuse pods glowing scarlet amongst the gray rocks and the brown moss, and the fine-webbed witchery of the hoarfrost lying on the sere leaves in the shadow.

Clem Sanders's massive figure was the focus of the group, with his leather apron girded about him, his sleeves rolled back from his muscular arms, the light of the fire — a steady red glow, for the bellows was idle — upon his square, good-humored face, which was refined by that look of earnest attention and grave content characteristic of the good workman at his chosen task. One hand held with the tongs the metal upon the anvil; the other wielded the hand-hammer with deft precision, and the sledge came crashing down, as Jube, the parson's son, grasped it with both hands. The brown shadows clustered about them, and the figure of the striker with the sledge was only dimly suggested in the rich depths of the picture. Each detail grew more distinct

as the young man advanced; the apartment gradually seemed lighter than it did at a distance, seen through the brilliant crisp air, and with the contrast of the sunshine and the high color of the autumnal world without. As the cinders, which were mingled with the earth, at the door, began to grate beneath his feet, he wondered that none of those within took note of his deadly intention; that the smith should stand undefended, unwarned, for Clem's unnoting head was bent over his work, and the yellow sparks flew from the red-hot iron as the hammer and the sledge alternately fell. Longwood did not realize how much the habitual imperturbable aspect characteristic of the mountaineer cloaked his agitation and his design. Even when he strode into the place, his drawn knife in his hand, calling out, "Clem Sanders, stand up ter fight! I be a-goin' ter kill ye!" the idler in the doorway, chewing his quid of tobacco, merely shifted his eyes again to the new-comer, and an elongation in the stiff wrinkles about his mouth betokened preparation to smile. Teck Jepson withdrew slowly his attention from the forest wilds without, and the smith responded cheerily, his head still bent over the anvil, "Kill away!" while the painstaking blows of the forging alternated with the precision of machinery and the sparks flew.

Longwood hesitated for a moment; then, with a swift fear that his resolution might fail him, he rushed impetuously forward. The sharp knife in his hand struck the blacksmith beneath the shoulder blade; it was long and keen enough to have pierced his heart. There was no fault in the weapon, — a good strong knife; the hand had faltered, — no sincere hatred had nerved it. The blade fell clanking to the ground, as the blacksmith tapped the face of the anvil as a signal that the blows of the sledge should cease. He turned around slowly, his straight eyebrows lifted. "What air ye doin' of, Andy?" he demanded.

"I stabbed ye. I wanter kill ye," Longwood muttered,

doubtful of himself and bereft of his weapon, for Clem Sanders had casually stooped and picked up the knife.

The movement had possibly caused the slight wound to gape.

"Look-a-yander how Clem's a-bleedin'!" exclaimed Jube Donnard, in the excited falsetto of a born sensationalist.

"Great Molly Har!" cried the smith, showing emotion for the first time, "did he cut a hole in this hyar brand-new shirt? Mam hev jes' done wove it, an' she 'lowed ef these hyar shirts did n't las' me no longer 'n common, I'd hev ter git the trash cloth at the store, ready wove, or else marry a wife ter do the weavin'. Kase she 'lows it's through gamesomeness, an' not work, I git my clothes so tore up. Look-a-hyar, Andy," — he fixed a severe, threatening eye on his assailant, — "ye boys air gittin' too rough in yer playin', kemin' an' a-cuttin' other folkses clothes. Mighty pore fun."

He shook his head reprehensively, and turned excitedly toward Jube who again cried out, "Look how Clem's a-bleedin'!"

"I ain't a-keerin' fur that!" exclaimed the doughty blacksmith. "It will stop bleedin' d'rectly. An' my skin will do its own repairin' 'thout mam ter talk a bushel med-jure 'bout the sadness o' hevin' ter patch. What I'm tormented 'bout air this hyar tear in this new shirt. Air it sizable much?"

He crooked his neck dexterously and sought to look over his shoulder to see the rent, but for all his muscle he could not accomplish the feat.

"What air ye ondertakin' ter stab folks fur, Andy Longwood?" Teck Jepson had ceased to lean against the window, and his tone was stern and inquisitorial. "What do ye want ter kill Clem fur? Do ye s'pose I'd hev stood by an' seen ye done sech?"

The young fellow, aghast at what he had done, and still more aghast at what he had sought to do, experienced a

sudden revulsion of feeling upon hearing Jepson's words; his fluctuating anger, that had failed to bear him through his enterprise, flared up anew. His pride, too, was touched that Clem had held his rage and the wound he had dealt as so slight a thing, — offering not even a blow in return; he was nettled that in no way could he impress a commensurate idea of the intention and the spirit that had animated him, and he resented infinitely Jepson's tone, upbraiding him as if he were a boy. The wish for adequate reprisal, to deal him a blow that he would surely feel to the quick, broke down what slight reserves his boyish nature had.

"Ye hev got the same reason ter want him dead ez me!" he cried out. "Marcelly Strobe air a-goin' ter marry him. Her dad said so, — an' she did, too."

He had the satisfaction of seeing Teck Jepson palpably recoil. He was all at once very pale. He did not look at Clem Sanders, nor seem to see anything very definitely. He gazed blankly into space, or perhaps into the vistas of memory for corollary data to confirm this thing. His hand was on the window-sill, and it trembled visibly.

Andy Longwood watched these symptoms of pain, each pang of which he could well divine, with a sort of gloating relish, and once or twice his quick breathing was so pronounced as to seem a snort of victory.

"Now! Now!" he said, nodding his head triumphantly.

Clem Sanders had stood as one petrified, turning over these significant words in his mind, with a rampant doubt on his face. Suddenly he regained his faculty of motion and his easy credulity. He tore off his leather apron, leaving the iron cooling on the anvil. As he plunged his dark red head into the barrel of cold water, where he usually tempered steel, his intention of making a toilet began to be manifest to the idlers about the place. Their rallying laughter and gibes gave Andy Longwood food for meditation anew. Evidently this was news to Clem, and the others seemed to readily appreciate it.

"Take another souse, Clem, ef ye air goin' a-visitin'," observed the grinning Bassett; "then she can't tell how red yer head be."

Clem stared at him credulously, and obediently thrust again his red head into the water, in the midst of renewed merriment.

Andy Longwood experienced a sudden terror, which showed that his hope was not dead, as he had accounted it, but merely comatose.

"Don't tell her 'twar *me* ez stabbed ye, Clem," he pleaded, every vestige of the desperado gone. "Don't tell on me."

"G'long, Andy!" replied the good-natured fellow. "I hev got suthin' better'n you-uns ter talk about."

He put on his coat, and strode briskly out of the forge and up the hill. They could hear him whistling a long way. Before he had reached Eli Strobe's cabin, however, the blithe tones were checked. He in his turn heard music,—a vague, fitful lilting; now striking out with some full, rich tone, then trailing away to a meditative murmur, as if the lips whence it issued were closed save for this dream of a sound. He looked about for a moment, uncertain in the silence; and then the song came again, clear and serene, and mellow as the day itself, seeming a part of the fine and full culminations that the yellow sunshine, and the violet haze, and the deeply blue sky, and the calm of the season expressed. It was Marcella, singing like a dryad in the woods, fragments and fitful impulses stirring the sylvan solitudes with sweet and vagrant accords, and making the echo timorous to try so elusive a strain.

#### XIV.

CLEM SANDERS turned aside into the woods, following the sound. The sere leaves rustled under his feet; the vistas seemed to be clarified by their pure, fine brown color; now and then a dash of the bolder red or yellow of the foliage, still hanging on the trees, served at once to accent it and as a contrast. The boles were dark, and stood out distinctly, apparently innumerable. He did not see her; he waited, listening, but she sang no more, and he pressed forward without even this variant and uncertain guide. There was much fallen timber here and there, victims of the late storm, the leaves still clinging to their limbs; sometimes a sturdy neighbor had caught the smitten tree, and still stood, upbearing the dead bulk, its own doom certain but slow in the weight of its lifeless burden; and here was one whose fall had wrought at once complete devastation, — the giant of the forest hurled to the ground in a single blast, the roots torn from the earth; the topmost fibres of these clay-embedded roots were higher than the saplings hard by; a deep excavation showed where they had once been buried. Suddenly a hound clambered out of this cavity, nosing about with occasional wheezes, evidently bent on small game. "I'll be bound Andy Longwood didn't let ye run rabbits whenst *he* owned ye," even the lenient blacksmith was moved to observe, marking this lapse from the accepted traditions of the etiquette of deerhounds. He welcomed the sight of him, however, as the herald of Marcella, and presently he saw her sitting quite still on the bole of a fallen tree, her head bare, flecked with the sunshine as the leaves stirred above her, one hand listlessly clasping the

bough near by, and the other holding a bunch of herbs which Mrs. Strobe had charged her to seek; a basket of eggs was at her feet. As she looked up and saw Clem coming toward her, his heart sank, so serene, and casual, and unmoved was her glance. He had not doubted his good fortune since the first stupendous moment of its revelation, but now he recognized the incongruity of her expression, and its utter irreconcilability with his conclusion. He had been prepared to be embarrassed, being — to use his own phrase — “bashfuller ’n ennybody.” But in all his experience he had never known so awkward and unhappy an interval as when he paused beside her, after the succinct exchange of salutation, “Howdy.”

She looked calmly forward, and as he stood by the tree, with one hand upon a branch that seemed to come out in a neighborly way and give him something to lean upon, at all events, he gazed searchingly down at her, then blankly at the sun-flecked woods, then once more bent his earnest eyes upon her.

“Been a-huntin’ aigs?” was the scanty result of all this cogitation, as he indicated the basket of eggs.

Marcella nodded assent. Then, after a silence she demanded, “Enny objection?”

Even Clem could not fail to observe the flash of laughter in her eyes, but it did not serve to render him more comfortable.

“Naw ’m, — naw ’m,” he said, with propitiating precipitation.

A long pause ensued. Marcella, despite her own deliberate methods of conversation, found these intervals of irksome duration, and was moved to make a remark.

“I hev been huntin’ guinea-hens’ aigs. They hide ’em so fur off, in sech out’n-the-way places, but I fund a right smart chance of ’em.” She looked down with satisfaction into her basket at the dull cream-colored trophies, captured from the fowls, whose old vagrant instinct so long survives domestica-



tion. "I fund twelve in one nest. I hev got a whole passel o' guineas."

"Yes-sum!" said Clem, eagerly awaiting a pause that he might interject this earnestly acquiescent formula. For all his bashfulness, he scarcely withdrew his eyes from her face. His manner, too, was sufficiently assured, but in every word he manifested his reverent humility, and his timidity, and his earnest repudiation of any sentiment or opinion, however dear, that might not coincide with hers. He would have found it hard, so beset was he by doubt and fear, to put his fate to the test at any time. But to go through all the decorous preliminaries of asking her hand and heart, without disclosing that he had been prompted by the encouragement which he had had from Andy Longwood's report, was beginning to seem inconceivably hazardous to a transparent soul, who had never hidden an emotion in his life, or known a secret that he did not tell. He was wrestling with the anxiety of the consciousness of her preference and the necessity to make her suppose he knew nothing of it, when she suddenly spoke again. The mention of the guinea-hens reminded her of their donor, and of her ruse to take his weapon that he might do no harm. "Hev ye seen Andy Longwood ter-day?" she asked casually, seeking to know how far she had been successful.

It seemed to him in the moment that she had opened a way for him. "Yes-sum. That's why I kem hyar, — straight, straight ez I hearn it. I felt so happy, — an' yit I war 'feard 't war n't true. 'T war true, Marcellly? 'T war true, though?"

She looked up at him, startled and amazed at his vehemence; her eyes dilated, wonder in every eloquent trait. "What's kem over ye, Clem Sanders? Air *what* true?" she asked bluntly.

"Marcellly," he replied, his voice trembling, "don't git mad at me, no matter what happens; ye know I ain't school-larned like yer dad." This was merely a fortuitous stroke

of policy, for his simple nature was not capable of attempting genuine strategy. "I dunno ef ye hev furgot, but Andy Longwood said ez ye 'lowed ter him ye war goin' ter marry me; an' the Lord knows I hev lived an' breathed jes' in that hope, 'pears ter me, ever sence I war alive' but" — He stopped precipitately.

Her face was scarlet; her eyes flashed with a fire that seemed to scorch him.

"Did ye b'lieve *that*?" she cried contemptuously. "Did ye b'lieve I 'd 'low sech ez that? — an' I never did, 'ceptin' ter nod my head when dad said ez much, kase the doctor 'lowed we must n't argufy an' cross dad, an' git him sot catawampus in his temper. Did ye 'low I 'd say in earnest I 'd marry a man ez never axed me?"

For once in his life Clem spoke to her with eager and decisive opposition. But even then it was prefaced with his suave "Yes-sum." "But, shucks, Marcellly! Talk about axin'! Ye know I 'd hev axed enny day in the year ez I war n't afeard ter. Ye air obleeged ter know 't war jes' kase I war afeard ye 'd say no. I kep' a-puttin' it off, 'lowin' mebbe suthin' mought happen ter make ye think mo' of me."

She was not appeased. "Waal," she observed calmly, "I war n't in earnest. I never thunk about marryin' ye. An' I won't."

"Yes-sum," said Clem, crestfallen. "But ye 'll never git nobody, Marcellly, ez would try harder ter do jes' like ye wanted him ter. I would n't cross yer notions no way ye could fix 'em. These other boys in the Cove, ef ye air thinkin' 'bout choosin' one out'n Brumsaidge" —

"I don't *choose* folks. I 'lowed I hed tole ye that," she responded, holding her head very high on her fine and delicate neck, and looking at him with her definite straight eyebrows frowningly meeting above her dark eyes, that seemed to him unnaturally clear and brilliant.

"Yes-sum. But howsomdever these other boys air power-

ful set in thar way, an' some o' thar ways ain't pritty ones." This as closely approached slander as the good Clem Sanders could compass. "They air toler'ble good boys," he felt constrained to qualify, "but they would n't be good fur ye ter marry. I tell ye, now, Marcelly, ye mought find a smarter man mos' ennywhar, — though not a better blacksmith, — but ye'll never find nobody ez loves ye like I do, an' would take the pains ter please ye like I would, ef ye war ter marry me."

"I hev got no sort'n notion o' doin' it, — never hed," she declared bluntly.

"Yes-sum," said Clem, infinitely cast down.

"I dunno ez I hev got ter marry enny o' the boys in the Cove. I dunno ez I hev got ter marry ennybody," she said loftily. "Some folks don't."

"Yes-sum; but did n't they always 'pear ter you-uns ter be powerful lonesome?" he suggested humbly.

This did not altogether fail to take effect. She pondered silently for a time on this phase of a single life. Presently she remarked: —

"I would n't be no lonesomer single 'n I'd be married ter *some* folks."

He interpreted this as a thrust at his own lack of certain congenial and companionable qualities which she esteemed essential.

"Yes-sum," he replied, more cut down still.

Perhaps she felt some pang of pity for his disappointment; perhaps she was not now so angry as at first, because of his very natural mistake, and thought it the least brutal method of disposing of his superfluous heart to argue the uncongeniality of his interests and pursuits.

"An' air yer ways so powerful pritty, Clem?" she demanded. "Cornsiderin' how close we neighbor the forge, an' hear the dancin', an' the fiddlin', an' the wrastlin', an' laffin' ez goes on thar of a evenin', I never expected ter live ter hear yer ways called pritty ones."

"Yes-sum," said Clem. "But ef ye'd marry me I'd stay home of a evenin', an' that thar forge would be dark an' still enough I'll be bound."

"Waal, yer wife, whoever she'll be, won't want sech fiddlin', an' dancin', an' singin' round her in her house of a evenin' ez ye hev been useter, Clem. I can't think o' ye no ways but ez cavortin',—though ye air mighty peaceable an' quiet, an' *kin* behave some sinilar ter a mouse whenst ye kem visitin' the gals."

"Yes-sum," said poor Clem. "But I don't visit no gals but you-uns."

"Laws-a-massy! An'.jes' think how Is'bel an' granny hev been gin over ter pride, bein' ez they 'lowed ye kem a-visitin' them!" There was a wicked gleam in her eye as she sped this dart. "Naw, naw! everybody knows the name that thar forge hev got!"

"Yes-sum." He hesitated for a moment; then he said, looking at her, his jaw growing square and determined, his expression changing with this infusion of more mundane matters into his thoughts, "Thar ain't a-goin' ter be enny mo' o' them queer midnight goin's-on at the forge, Marcell, arter this,—ye mark my words." Then, as if he fancied he had spoken too roughly, he hastened to say, apropos of nothing, "Yes-sum," and cleared his throat.

Marcella sat feeling stunned for a moment. Could he have known, in some inexplicable way, of the discovery that she had made at the forge in the wild, stormy midnight? Was he indeed aware of the intrusion of Jake Baintree and the stranger, who worked the bellows, and wielded the hammer and sledge, and were frightened when interrupted, and who came forth only to give aid for humanity's sake? She would not forget that they gave aid, whatever might happen, she said to herself.

He did not interpret her expression aright; he only saw that she was at a loss.

"Hain't ye never hearn what happened at the forge arter Pa'son Donnard 'lowed he seen the devil thar?"

"Naw," she said, fixing her eyes gravely on him.

Her interest in the subject emboldened him to sit beside her on the log, but as he bent forward, leaning his elbows on his knees and looking at her, he only saw her profile; for she listened silently, flattering him with her air of attention, but did not turn her head.

"Waal, arter the pa'son seen the devil thar I felt toler'ble tormented, an' sorter kep' a lookout on the forge; an' one night, 'bout midnight" (Marcella's foot stirred uneasily amongst the pine cones; her face was a trifle paler than its wont; her lips were slightly compressed), "I hearn the hammer an' the sledge a-poundin' an' the bellows a-roarin', an' fur all 't war a moonlight night" —

"Oh, moonlight!" exclaimed Marcella with a note of relief.

"Yes-sum, bright moonlight — but I could see the forge fire a-flarin' through the chinkin'. Waal, I dunno what got inter me, but I felt obligated ter know ef that thar dead Clem Sanders — Ye hearn' bout *him*, did n't ye, what pa'son purtended ter see?" He spoke with acerbity and a curling lip.

Marcella nodded.

"I wanted ter see ef *he* war thar agin, with the devil mebbe a-strikin' fur him. Waal, I war so darned clumsy an' awkward I fell down flop agin the window-shutter; an' I hev got purty fur ter fall, an' thar's a heap o' me ter topple, an' I like ter hev busted the side o' the house down. An' when I got up thar war no light, nor sound, nor nuthin'; jes' a leetle mite o' a live-coal on the ha'th, an' the anvil a-singin'. Waal, I 'lowed 't war Satan, till Jube Donnard — ye know, the pa'son's son, a darned tattler! — he went an' tole it all ter his dad. An' ef ye 'll b'lieve me, that thar godly old man did go an' prop hisself on the side o' the mounting ter git a view o' Satan, — wanted ter see him!"

"The pa'son!" exclaimed Marcella, vaguely scandalized.

"Yes-sum, the pa'son! An' I tole Jube I would never

listen ter him preach no mo' — enny godly man ez hankered ter view the devil agin, arter hevin' viewed him wunst! An' a-skitterin' out in the middle o' the night, like he war one o' the boys, along with that thar caper-y Jube! Sometimes I feel like *I* be too pious *myself* ter 'sociate with the pa'son's son. An' Jube up-ed an' 'lowed ez he did n't keer whether I went ter hell through neglectin' means o' grace an' the pa'son's sermons or jes' from active wickedness, an' ez his fambly hed no contrac', ez he knowed on, ter land *me* on the golden shore! Jube say him an' his mam ain't the pa'son, an' nuthin' like it, an' the congregation hain't got a mortgage on nare hair o' thar heads, though the pa'son 'lows ez his flock owns him."

Clem repeated the sharp retort of his friend without any show of temper, as if he were merely interested in setting the purport of the conversation before Marcella. She kept quite still, her hands holding the bunch of herbs, her eyes meditative and yet attentive. She seemed to pursue a definite train of thought, which she in some sort modified and adjusted in reference to his disclosure. He had never talked so much in all his life. He found a new and unique pleasure in sitting beside Marcella, feeling liberated in some sort, since Mrs. Strobe's sarcasms no longer paralyzed his simple modes of thought, nor Isabel's pert interruptions embarrassed him and cut him short. Marcella seemed willing, nay, eager, to hear, and how glad he was to tell! Always afterward he associated the place with that happy hour: the drear season of autumn seemed the choicest time of the year. How should he take heed now that the splendor of the turn of the leaf was but a hectic red and presage of death; that the sun would be but a cold glitter for a time; that snows were garnering somewhere; and many things light and blithe — that bird in its poise on the golden-rod, the squirrel frisking along the tree, even a deer of which they had a sudden glimpse, approaching in a silent interval, thrusting out its graceful head, with startled lustrous eyes,

from the laurel not twenty yards away, and disappearing at the sight of them — all should die under the rigors of the hard winter coming. He saw only how Marcella's hair waved, how fair of face she was, how the sunlight crept to her feet and crouched there, like a tame thing, casting a yellow brilliancy into her brown eyes as she looked down. It was an undreamed-of delight, this choice confidence, and she might be sure of hearing all to which she would listen; he had forgotten the doubtful past and his fears for the future in the rich flavor of the exquisite present.

"Ye see, Marcelly, Jubè air one o' them boys ez tell all they know, an' ain't got no sort'n jedgmint; though he's good-hearted, Jube is, an' him an' me useter play roun' the wood-pile in the chips tergether 'fore we-uns could walk. An' so we be toler'ble friendly. An' though Jube tells on me ter the pa'son, he kems back an' tells on the pa'son ter me."

His eyes twinkled, for he thought that, having little to lose, he might endure Jube's frankness better than the parson, who must be flawless. Then his face grew grave with a certain reflective intentness; a prescient excitement was kindling in his eye.

"Waal, Jube say that night whilst him an' the pa'son roosted like two demented tur-rkey gawblers up thar on them big bluffs right above my forge, they seen no devils, but about midnight two men kem along the road, — powerful dark night it war; they kem gingerly along, an' Jube say they stopped right thar in front o' the door o' the shop. Jube say he knows, kase he hearn one o' 'em rattlin' the latch I put on them big doors ter keep 'em from blowin' open in the wind. An' then Jube, stiddier waitin' fur 'em ter go in an' see what they 'd do, jes' 'lowed he 'd skeer 'em, an' he flapped his arms an' crowed — Ye ever hear Jube crow?" he demanded suddenly, breaking off.

She shook her head slowly from side to side, although

she refrained from saying that she did not covet the privilege in future.

"Yes-sum. Waal, sir," continued Clem in pride, "he kin crow like a sure-enough, reg'lar rooster, — ye 'd think 't war haffen a dozen poultry. Skeered the pa'son, sir, bein' so onexpected, mighty nigh ter death. Jube can't keep from laffin' now whenst he tells 'bout'n it, though he say he knows the devil will burn him well fur laffin' at his dad. An' them men, they hollered an' runned a leetle way. An' then they stopped an' hailed Jube. An' all of a suddenty the sheet-lightning flickered up, broad an' steady, an' he seen who 't war."

Marcella's cheek was burning; her excited bright eyes were still cast down, and how the sunlight at her feet flared luminously into their limpid depths! She could hardly wait to hear, although she knew before she heard.

Clem lowered his voice to a husky murmur. "'T war Jake Baintree, one of 'em," he said. "An' the t'other Jube hed never seen afore, — dressed diffe'nt, some similar ter town folks, some o' the boys say, from what Jube tells: tall, with sandy whiskers, an' light, an' quick-steppin'. Oh, Jube will know him agin, ef ever he gits a show at him!"

There was a sort of savage exultation in his voice, and in his face as he nodded his head to one side with a burly gesture of triumphant forecast.

Marcella felt a sudden cold thrill. She turned her head, and her eyes met his. "How does Jube expec' ter see him agin? What 's he contrivin' ter do?"

Even Clem Sanders hesitated, conscious that in this lure of happiness he had been led too far. The secret he would not have deemed safe with any woman. Had she been the wife that he wished to make her, he might have contrived to shift, to evade, to postpone. She was not married to him, and he could deny her nothing.

"Yes-sum," he began, with polite preface; "but don't let them boys know ez I hev tole ye, Marcelly, else they 'd



string me up ter a tree. Thar's a lot of 'em a-layin' fur Jake an' that strange man."

"What air they a-goin' ter do ter 'em?" Her voice had risen from its mellow contralto tones into a husky shrillness that was a note of fear, presaging horror.

Clem Sanders's sensibilities were not acute, and he did not recognize its meaning.

"That depends on what sort'n account they kin gin o' tharselves."

He was flattering himself that he had succeeded in so interesting her, and as he looked at her his long and narrow eyes smiled brightly, in the full faith of pleasing her.

"Gin an account o' tharselves?" she murmured ponderingly. She remembered how fragmentary and indefinite had been their explanation of their intrusion at the forge and of the stranger's presence in the mountains. This, she was sure, would fail to satisfy aught but gratitude that in its fullness was content to abate even curiosity. How should it satisfy antagonistic, suspicious, even cruel men, who had set themselves to spy, to judge, to punish? The rough habits of the region, the lawless justice sometimes meted out by the arbitrary tribunals who claimed the preservation of local morals as within their exclusive jurisdiction, were only too familiar to her. She realized with a quick throb of the heart that these men were in danger. They had involved themselves in mystery; their midnight intrusions at the forge could hardly be easily explained and innocently accounted for, or they would not have been secret. She was aware, too, of that insurmountable inequality which character creates in equal conditions. Had it been Bassett and Jube Donnard who, for secret purposes of their own, had invaded the smith's forge and cloaked their comings and goings in mystery, it would have been hard to rouse Broom-sedge Cove to any sense of wrong that the owner might have sustained, or any threatened security of the public peace and honor. Far less leniently regarded would be

the same deeds wrought in the same way by Jake Baintree, who according to public opinion had escaped the gallows by a technicality, and this stranger, a physician, a learned man, lurking in his company, probably seeking to evade the vengeance of the law for some dark deed that she shuddered to more definitely imagine. Doubtless they were in danger.

She had strong nerves. There was nothing partisan in her manner as she said, "How do ye know they ever war in the forge a-workin' an' sech? Ez ter Jube, I don't set no store by Jube's seein'. He kin see ennything he air a mind ter, — or else *say* he hev seen it. Mought be Satan, sure enough."

"Yes-sum," acquiesced Clem. "It air somebody ez ain't used ter the blacksmithin' business, fur no good smith would hev let that thar leetle bend in my leetle tongs git bruk off that-a-way, an' then botch it a-mendin' it. That hurt my feelin's wuss 'n all, — the way he done the work." He shook his head, grieved at the artificer's incapacity. "But sence Jube knowed ez 't war Jake Baintree at the latch, the boys don't b'lieve in the devil no mo', — leastwise not at the forge, 'thout it 's him along o' Jake. Jake 's ekal ter ennythin'. Ye know he killed Sam'l Keale."

"He never!" Marcella burst forth suddenly. "*Dad* say he never!"

"Yes-sum." Clem made haste to agree. "Ye know, though, that 's what them fellers up an' down declar'."

Marcella was silent for a moment, regretting her display of feeling, but Clem, alarmed for the progress which he fancied he had made in her good graces, proceeded with the subject in which she so evidently felt an interest.

"They — whoever they air — hain't been ter the forge more 'n a few times, an' that 's a fac', — the night whenst I saw it lighted up, an' the time when they tried ter git in, an' Jube skeered 'em off; arter that the boys began ter set up reg'lar fur 'em."

"Whar?" she exclaimed, aghast; then recollecting herself, she asked more calmly, "Wharbouts, Clem?"

"At my house. Night arter night 'bout ten of 'em hev kem thar with thar rifles, an' watched that thar forge fur a glimge o' light through the chinkin', an' listened fur the hammer an' sledge. But them two hev n't never lit up the forge but twict, — the time I seen it, an' Gid Dake seen it wunst afore that. Though some say they b'lieve 't war lighted that night o' the big storm; the boys kem ter watch, but it 'peared so durned rainy they 'lowed 't war n't no use."

So the vigilantes had nodded while she made her perilous journey to the forge, that terrible night, and brought help thence. She trembled to think how slight a thing had saved the two intruders.

"They hain't done much harm, — jes' three times sence the first of August, an' this air deep in the fall o' the year," she commented.

"Yes-sum," assented Clem. "But nobody knows what harm they air doin', an' what mo' they air goin' ter do. Ef it's good, 't ain't apt ter be hid."

"I dunno who sets them Brumsaidge boys up ter jedge," she said angrily, abandoning argument for more facile depreciation.

"Yes-sum," said Clem blandly. "But they ain't the sort ter wait ter be set; they jes' set tharse'fs up, — with thar rifles ter prop 'em," he added, carrying out the figure.

There was a troubled restlessness in her anxious bright eyes, a pathetic droop in her red lips. She looked deeply thoughtful, careful, plotting, as she said: —

"I wonder at ye, Clem Sanders, knowin' ez ye do ez sech ez that air agin the law, to capture them men; an' ef thar 'count o' tharselves don't suit ye foolish Brumsaidge pates, a-shootin' them two fellers, or stringin' 'em up. An' ye a-lettin' them spies an' lynchers ter meet at yer house ter watch an' lie in wait!"

"Yes-sum. Laws-a-massy, Marcelly," exclaimed Clem, enlightened and precipitate, "ef ye don't want 'em ter kem ter my house an' spy, I 'll run 'em every one off from thar, — every mother's son of 'em, ef I hev ter shoot a hole through every man's head ter git him started. Say the word, Marcelly!" he cried, in the enthusiasm of his prospective obedience. "Say the word!"

Marcella was mechanically tearing the herbs into bits in her trembling hands, as she sat and thought, — significant thoughts, since the lives of two men, perchance, hung upon them.

"That would n't do no good," she remarked presently. "They 'd jes' take tharselves ter watchin' somewhar else." After a moment she added bitterly, "Ye know how sech men be: gin 'em a notion arter blood, an' it's no mo' use ter call 'em off 'n 't is ter blow yer horn fur a hound ez air followin' on a hot scent. 'Thar 's some hound an' some painter an' some fox in sech men," the soft-faced young cynic declared.

"Yes-sum," faltered Clem Sanders. He sat dumfounded for a moment, the significance of her troubled mien gradually dawning on his slow perceptions. "Laws-a-massy, Marcelly," he cried, "ef ye want me ter, I 'll jes' let them men work in my forge ez a constancy, scot-free. I won't gredge 'em nuthin', though they bruk up every tool in my shop, an' " — his face clouded — "mended 'em arterward. I will say I never see sech work, — the man oughter be 'shamed! I dunno whar in Kingdom Come he could hev larnt his trade, — sech larnin' ez he hev got. But I 'll take Jake Baintree an' that strange man, ef he war the devil, inter partnership, ef 't will please you-uns. That 's all I live fur, Marcelly, — ter please you-uns. Ef ye will marry me," he continued, leaning nearer to her, — "ef ye 'll marry me " —

"Oh," exclaimed the girl, with a gesture of impatient repudiation, "Ye air so tormentin' tiresome."

"Yes-sum," said Clem, drawing back, rebuked, but not alienated.

"Would enny other mortal on the yearth 'low I'd marry a man so ez ter git his cornsent fur two other idle idjits ter hev the run of his forge?"

Clem thought that it would be better for all concerned if the "other idjits" were idle, but he only murmured, "Naw-'m," and listened with respectful and earnest attention as she went on.

"I ain't got no wish 'bout'n 'em, 'ceptin' I don't want 'em kilt nor hurted no ways, — jes' fur thar sake, not mine; jes' kase they air folks, an' hev got a right ter live till thar Maker calls 'em. Takes a man ter expect ter git suthin' fur hisself ter pay him fur every leetle favior he does fur other folks."

She was fast becoming pessimistic under the stress of her fears, and her perplexities, and her consequent anxious irritation.

"Yes-sum," said Clem in humble concession. Then plucking up, "I jes' mean ter say, Marcelly, ez I would do enny-thing ter pleasure you-uns, an' ef ye want them men ter work in my forge, they kin do it an' welcome!"

She looked sharply at him, seeking to discern in his open, ingenuous countenance any indication that he divined that she had more definite knowledge of the intruders than he had been able to secure, that she was ready to scheme for their safety, that she tolerated and continued the conversation in their behoof, in the hope of further information for their sake. But it was evident that Clem Sanders, in the fullness of his loyalty, neither questioned her motives nor even speculated concerning them; he accepted all that she said and did as he accepted the sunshine, — as the most righteous and beneficent expression of the generosity of nature. Some gratitude stirred in her heart with the recognition of the depth and sincerity of the sentiment with which he regarded her, and it was more gently that she said: —

"Ye could n't do nuthin' nohow, Clem. Wunst them boys hev got the idee, nuthin' kin stop 'em, an' ef they did n't watch at yer house they 'd watch somewhar."

"Yes-sum," said Clem.

"An'," she went on thoughtfully, "ef, when they tuk arter them men, ye tried ter stop 'em, they mought slash ye up, or shoot ye 'mongst 'em, an' I don't want that ter happen."

His face was irradiated by this evidence of her care for him.

"Yes-sum!" he cried jubilantly.

Marcella rose abruptly from the log. "I mus' be goin' in," she remarked.

She put on her tunnel-like sunbonnet, and with the eclipse of her face within its depths the day seemed to him to have darkened suddenly. She stood irresolute for a moment, looking vaguely about her; her attitude denoted despondency; she drew a long breath that had a suggestion of a sigh, and then she picked up her basket of eggs.

"Kin I tote yer basket fur ye, Marcella?"

"Ye could, bein' toler'ble survigrous, — ef I'd let ye," she responded ungraciously, still keeping hold of the handle of the basket. She moved slowly along, her tread noiseless upon the thick carpet of pine needles; only now and then her skirts stirred the fallen leaves, that gave a sibilant rustle. Clem walked humbly beside her, looking down at the baffling sunbonnet that hid her face, and keeping silence in deference to her mood. All the world was still; the sunshine made no progress from limb to limb of the dark bare trees where it lay so yellow. And time was surely drowsing somewhere. The sky was cloudless, changeless. Winds! — they were now a mere tradition; the day had suggestions that seemed eternal in its rich, enduring light, its serene impassivity. The shadows, too, were motionless, save for those of the young mountaineers as they passed under the boughs.

Marcella paused when they reached the fence that was the boundary of Eli Strobe's land, and Clem began to see

that she intended to take leave of him here. There was a gap in the fence ; some of the rails lay half fallen, one end upon the ground and one supported by the zigzag structure. She rested her basket here, and glanced up at him from the shadow of her sunbonnet. Her eyes seemed dark and melancholy, and her look was afar off, somehow, and he had a sense of distance from her which led him abruptly to exclaim, " I ain't said nuthin' ter make ye mad at me, hev I, Marcelly ? "

She laughed a little. " Nuthin' but foolishness. But thar 's so much o' that in this world thar 's no use in gittin' mad ; don't make folks no mo' reasonable ez I knows on."

" Yes-sum. But ye ain't mad at me ? " he pleaded.

" Naw, I ain't, — I ain't," she exclaimed impatiently ! " Good-by," she added, encouragingly.

" Yes-sum. Good-by," the poor fellow echoed dolorously ; and so he turned and took his way down the long lane, leaving her still standing at the fence. His heart was heavy within him ; how eager she had been to be rid of him ! His hope had sunk ; the wound his rival had dealt began to ache. He felt a repulsion for all the familiar world, for all the aspects of the future as they shaped themselves before his glance, unwontedly prescient. Life hardly seemed worth the living, and he had scant courage to see it through. His mental and moral atmosphere was all uncharacteristic, and although he had not command of even the simplest capacity to feign, and made no effort to disguise the downcast spirit in which he had returned from his open and obvious mission, the gossips at the forge forbore, rather from an intuition of prudence and policy than a merciful desire of sparing him, to rally him upon his defeat. He was stern and gruff, and the presence of his cronies grated upon his mood. He went to his work silently, some of his chagrin expending itself in an energy of industry, and the mellow clanking of the hammers roused the echoes to their wonted iteration ; under his skill the metal grew soft or hard as he

willed, and for a time there was no indication that aught was amiss with the master of the forge, save his dull, intent, and frowning face. This tense mood could not continue, and presently, under the strain, his nerves began to give way. He had already felt some slight inconvenience from the inexperience of Jube Donnard, who was striking for him to-day, his own assistant having gone hunting. Once so absorbed was he that, as he tapped the iron where Jube should strike, he did not swiftly remove the hammer as was his habit, and the great sledge, hoisted by the parson's son with both arms, came crashing down upon the hand-hammer, sending it flying out of the smith's practiced hand, and jarring his arm to the shoulder-blade. In a sudden passion he flung the bar of hot metal at his dodging volunteer striker, and then with a growling oath he turned away to the door.

"Time ter quit, ennyhow," said the facile Jube.

For the great red sunset was flaring in at the widely opened barn-like doors, and though the vermilion disk still lingered above the dusky purple mountains, the hunter's moon, a luminous sphere, pearly and splendid, swung high in the east, with all its sentiments of solitude and alien influences, with all its brooding nocturnal fancies, as if it were alone in the sky save for its familiar the vaguely scintillating star at the zenith.

"A clear night," said Clem to himself, with a sigh, as he sat down on the log by the door.

It was not the weather signs alone that gave his voice its significant intonation; it was the congruous circumstance furnished to the nocturnal enterprise. He noted presently a dark figure with a rifle on its shoulder, crossing the bridge above the narrows of the river, thrown into bold relief between the crimson sky and its lustrous red reflection in the water. The sun still gave the current a glint of gold; a rising vapor borrowed mysteries from the moon, and the figure seemed taller than normal height as it disappeared in



the woods. It was not long before Clem saw another armed man approaching from down the road. The vigilantes were gathering. He rose, with a long-drawn sigh, and closed the shop for the night, — for all his cronies were gone, — and then betook himself home to his supper.

He had had no very definite sentiment in regard to the organization that had charged itself with the enterprise of solving the mystery of the intrusions at the forge, and administering punishment should it be deemed required. It had seemed to him, however, natural and right enough that these enigmatical proceedings should, in the interests of public justice, be subjected to scrutiny, especially as it had been discovered that Jake Baintree, almost universally considered to have cheated the gallows, was concerned in them. Since, however, Marcella had set her face against the self-constituted judges, and had spoken of them with reprobation, his interest, his sense of injury, even his curiosity, had dwindled. He was conscious of wishing them all far enough from his premises when, after leaving his mother unsuspectingly washing the supper-dishes, thinking he had gone to his cronies at the forge, he took his way out through the tall sere grass and leafless bushes across the door-yard to the barn, where his hidden coadjutors lurked, awaiting him.

The building was of the description most usual in the region, constructed of logs, unhewn and unchinked, with a loft and a wide open space beneath, where a wagon, two or three plows, and a sorghum-mill stood. The brilliant moonlight fell through each crevice, its silver sheen alternating with the black shadow of the logs; the whole place was pervaded by this tempered splendor, and through the broad open pass-way he could see the white frost gleam responsive upon the expanse of the fields, on the rails of the fence, on the boughs of a great pallid, denuded tree with its stark and wintry shadows, on the clumps of broad mullein leaves beside the door. The horned heads of the three cows were distinct in the placid divergent rays, filtering through the crannies as

the animals still stood at their manger; and on the opposite side the two sorrel mares were half dozing, and did not so much as cast a glance toward him as he entered the shadowy place, so accustomed had they become to this in-coming and out-going of nocturnal visitants. A slim little filly, however, hardly larger than the calf that stood near by, came frisking out to see who was heralded by the sound of the step, and seemed to consider a great up-kicking and a series of bounding gambols on its wiry, angular legs an appropriate greeting; then finally disappeared into the shadows of its dam's stall. The calf suddenly backed its ears, and sought to imitate the filly's deft demivolt in a stiff bovine caper; then stood still once more, earnestly watching Clem as he made his way to the ladder, the rungs of which were very far apart, and up into the loft.

Here the shadows were less assertive, for a rude, square window had been cut in one of the gables, and the moonlight came through and lay in a refulgent rhomboidal figure upon the floor. An occasional flicker across it told of a fluctuating stir amongst the cobwebs that hung in thickly woven folds from the rafters, and were stretched in gossamer filaments across the aperture itself; sometimes, as these caught the light, they gave out a silvery glimmer, as if some precious metal had served in the weaving. There was a great pile of corn in the éar in one corner, and the swelling masses of hay bulged far over the open pass-way beneath, and almost hid it from view. Amongst its billows, close in to the wall, a setting hen, with outspread wings, was upon her nest; now and then she opened her small bright eyes, but for the most part she kept them calmly shut, for, timorous though she was, she had become inured to the strange conditions of the place, feeling assured that whatever might result from the councils held here, she and hers were not under consideration. Altogether incongruous and at variance with the simple, rural significance of the spot were the figures of armed men, that lay idly and at ease.

upon the hay, or strode restlessly to and fro upon the quaking flooring, or paused before the square moon-flooded window to look out upon the strip of cultivated land, the expanse of darkling forest on every hand, the violet vaporous spaces—empty air—above the unseen valley, and the towering, purple, moonlit ranges looming to the sky; but most of all, and often indeed, they looked down the white winding road where the little forge stood under the crag, between the mountains and the dark and lustrous river.

“Hy’re, Clem,” the owner of the premises was greeted, when his head appeared above the floor as he slowly mounted the rungs.

“Hy’re,” he responded in a gruff growl.

The tone and manner were so uncharacteristic that one or two of the martial figures striding about turned and looked around at him in surprise. Bassett, lying on the hay, lifted himself upon his elbow, and demanded, “What ails you-uns ter be so powerful high an’ mighty? Ye think ye air Teck Jepson, don’t ye?”

Clem Sanders said nothing for a moment. Still with his unwonted air of grave dissatisfaction, he lumbered into the moonlit place, one hand in his pocket, his shoulders slouched forward as he peered about from under his broad hat-brim at the men’s faces, as if he were seeking to individualize them, and mentally calling the roll.

“Whar’s Teck, ennyhows?” he asked. “He ain’t hyar.”

“Not yit,” sneered Bassett. “He’ll be kemin’ along arter a leetle, a-ridin’ of his mare, though he knows the rest o’ we-uns ’low ez ’tain’t safe ter hev hoss critters hitched round hyar. Ef all o’ we-uns done that, thar’d be enough hosses ter make ez much racket ez a comp’ny o’ cavalry, an’ them men would git a warnin’, and we-uns would never ketch ’em. Ye mark my words, Teck’ll be ’long d’recl’y, a-ridin’ like some great captain.”

As he spoke, a sudden, distant, undistinguished sound smote the air.

"What's that?" cried Bassett, half springing up, and resting upon one knee on the pile of hay.

"Hush!" said one of the vigilantes near the moonlit window. He bent toward it, his eyes scanning the empty road, the silent woods, and lonely mountains with the melancholy splendor upon them.

The others stood motionless, listening.

The man at the window abruptly turned toward them his moonlit face, the sheen full in his dilated, excited eyes; he held up one significant finger, bespeaking attention.

For the sound had come once more.

## XV.

AN interval of silence succeeded. The heavy, black shadows of the great trees hard by did not stir. The mute moonlight lay all down the vacant road, and rested unbroken upon the rude floor of the loft. The man at the square window stood motionless, his hand still uplifted, his illumined face questioning, intent. The only sound was the vague, lingering stir communicated through all the fibres of the hay when Bassett, half rising upon one knee in its midst, had shifted his weight. Suddenly an acorn from a chestnut-oak fell upon the roof, with a loud, imperative accent in the tense, expectant moment. It cracked upon the clapboards, that reverberated with the ready resonance of the void spaces of the interior, rebounded with a rattle, rolled deliberately down the eaves, and dropped thence to the ground. It was a slight thing, but if aught more significant had sounded in the interval, this trivial clamor had nullified it. The opportunity to continue to listen and identify the mysterious voice was lost, for one of the cows, below, had begun to low fitfully, and the rocks close at hand prolonged and reduplicated the lingering, melancholy note.

A half-articulate curse, and here and there a long-drawn respiration, intimated that the breathless tension of expectation had given way.

"'T war n't nuthin' but a ow-el," said one of the mountaineers, who had paused, as if petrified, in the middle of the floor, his hands in his pockets, his hat on the back of his head. He had a sedulously unimaginative aspect, as if determined to belittle the occurrence and denude it of consequence; and yet there was something in his tone that intimated a hope of contradiction.

"Ow-el! Waal, mebbe 'twar," ejaculated the man at the window perversely divining his desire.

"Waal, then, what did it sound like ter you-uns?" demanded the first speaker, frustrated in argument, and realizing that he would first have to foster a sensation in order to assume his favorite iconoclastic rôle. It is an old saying that two are required to make a quarrel, and it is not worn out yet.

"Sounded ter me," put in the simple Clem, "like a woman a-callin'."

"Else a wild-cat, or suthin'," suggested the first speaker. He was Peter Bryce, Mrs. Bowles's former lover; and although he had survived her cruelty, his disposition had succumbed to the souring influences of disappointment, and his estimate of women had suffered.

"Naw, sir!" said Clem, with a definite accession of acerbity, and becoming communicative under its stress. "I 'lowed 'twar *my mother* a-callin' me. Mought hev been mistaken, though," he qualified.

Bassett, still half kneeling in the billowy hay, in the shadow save for a slender moonbeam falling upon him from a crevice in the roof above, skein-like and fibrous, turned a suspicious eye upon the stalwart young blacksmith, who was indistinct in the semi-obscurity.

"Clem Sanders," he said sternly, "hev ye been fool enough ter tell her 'bout we-uns, an' sech ez we air lookin' ter do?"

There was no striding to and fro now; all the burly armed figures were still and silent for a moment, their eyes, whether distinct and shining in the moonlight, or barely discerned in the shadow, fixed with one accord upon Clem Sanders, who needed all his courage to face the suspicion of treachery that they expressed.

"Of course I never. What would I be a-tellin' mam sech ez that fur, in the name o' common sense? She be a-callin' me, I reckon, ter feed some apple-parin's ter the peegs, fur all I know."

There was a momentary silence ; then discerning the distinctly sullen note in his reply, Bassett found the tact to say : —

“Ye know, Clem, we hain’t got no objection ter Mis’ Sanders, ’ceptin’ her bein’ a woman ; bes’ one in the worl’, though. But ye know, Clem, ’tain’t safe ter trest ’em with sech. They tell everythin’ they know, an’ they hain’t got no sense ter reason on jestice an’ sech ; ’t would jes’ let them men plumb off, ef enny woman war ter git a-holt o’ it. ’T won’t do ter trest ’em with sech.”

“Nor with nuthin’ else,” said the cynical Peter Bryce, speaking from the fullness of his own experience, but with an abstract application to the whole sex that gave Clem Sanders no offense for his mother’s sake, and left him at liberty to suffer sundry pangs of regret that beset him at the recollection of his disclosure to Marcella. He threw himself down on the hay, close to the wall, his hat pulled far over his brooding eyes, his elbow upon the elastic masses, and resting his head in his hand. The cat, in a crevice between the unchinked logs, looked around at him with lustrous, recognizing eyes, and, kitten-like, she put out a white, velvety paw with a feint of touching his sunburned hand, falling short by an inch. Then she once more gazed calmly out, drawing her tail about her, and seeming always to rise slightly, as she purringly closed and unclosed the nails of her fore-paws. Her shadow on the floor, above that of the prostrate man, was like a crouching tiger, ready to spring.

“Can’t trest winnemen with nuthin’,” asseverated Peter Bryce loudly, for the cynic is rarely ready to enjoy alone his discoveries in human nature. He calls in all his world to help him make merry over the distortions of the poor, warped thing before it can get itself away.

“Waal, now, the Lord made ’em,” expostulated an elderly, grizzled fellow. It was not altogether piety which animated him. His threatening, lowering mien bespoke a

personal interest. He had seven daughters, when he would have infinitely preferred seven sons. He had, in each instance, absolved himself from all obligation to feel any special affection for these young people, who persisted in being so great a shock to his prejudices; he had sought to steel himself in indifference, and in his judgment that each was an affliction and a dead weight. But poor human nature is weak at best. His seven afflictions, all unabashed, proceeded to entwine themselves about his rude heartstrings as valiantly as could any seven sons. When he became conscious of this, he applied such simple philosophy as his untutored brain could evolve to devising excuses for them, as it were; and thence he advanced to insistence upon their equality — nay, superiority to any seven sons that could be mustered in Broomsedge Cove. “The Lord made wimmen,” he solemnly declared.

“By accident, I ’m thinkin’,” said Bassett.

“’T war n’t no job ter be proud of,” echoed Dake.

“War they made a-purpose so durned changeable?” demanded Bryce.

“An’ so onreasonable?” said Bassett.

“An’ sech a tongue onto all of ’em?” Dake suggested.

“An’ no answer but ‘Bekase ’t is,’ ter every why?” said Peter Bryce.

The father of the seven afflictions looked from one to the other, his eyes vigilant, like a creature at bay. He seemed to have a large contract on his hands, but he was inured, in his paternal charge, to large contracts, and thus he was not altogether dismayed. Perhaps in the exclusively feminine association at home he had learned something of the potency of feminine logic, and of the futility of imposing upon one’s capacities the devising of answers to categorical posers. He took refuge in a broad, unimpeachable proposition, which he delivered with all the impressiveness of refutation. “The Lord made wimmen,” he solemnly asseverated anew, as if piety forbade any criticism of the



supreme handiwork, and on this ground defying contradiction.

"An' what diff'ence is that?" demanded Bassett, with a sneer that the moonlight accented, glittering on his teeth.

"Who hev said contrariwise?" echoed Dake.

"The Lord made 'em," the paterfamilias again averred, with an arrogation of originality in his attitude as he advanced into the square of moonlight, which showed his bronzed face, with his short beard broadening its effect, his mild eye assuming belligerent intimations, as of a peaceful soul, who will, nevertheless, fight for his own, his long, thin lips firmly compressed beneath his bristly mustache. "The Lord made 'em, an' I ain't goin' ter hear nuthin' said agin 'em."

There was a pause. The frolicsome filly down in the stall below, kept awake, perchance, by the noise above, frisked about on two or three boards, upon which her small hoofs clattered noisily, doubtless to the admiration of her slower, wide-eyed friend the calf, and sent forth a shrill, gleeful little whinny, all head tones, indescribably callow. The mother responded with a note of maternal remonstrance; there was a sound of a scampering gallopade to her side, and the stall was still. The setting hen, close in to the wall, amidst the hay, stretched her long neck with its panting open bill, and emitted a sort of hysterical clucking of apprehension when the whole great mass trembled, as Bassett flung himself at length into its midst. His head was pillowed high amongst the fragrant billows, but his feet hung down unsupported, dangling to and fro with a disparaging gesture, as he demanded, "Hev ye tole yer wife an' that thar congregation o' small gals o' yourn 'bout sech ez air goin' for'ard ter-night 'mongst we-uns?"

The grizzled head, held askew as its owner listened, gave an angry jerk. "Course I hain't," the paterfamilias rejoined, in surly but succinct denial.

There was a sort of suppressed snort of indignation

amongst the vigilantes, prophetic of the fury that would await the supposititious betrayal; it seemed, indeed, that the very hypothesis was not a safe subject. Clem Sanders stirred uneasily.

"Waal, now," said the crafty Bassett, "why *don't* ye tell 'em?"

The elderly champion of the fair stood helpless and at a hopeless disadvantage; he laid hold of his square-cut beard, and held it meditatively as he gazed silently at his interlocutor.

"Why *don't* ye tell 'em?" repeated Bassett, half-chuckling at his own cleverness, the trend of his argument seeming hardly less than inspiration. "Ye know wimmen-folks never talk none; 't war n't one o' them, surely, ez tuk ter gossipin' in the very Gyardin o' Eden with the Evil One hisse'f. They *never* talk none an' spread the news, an' when thar ain't no news air plumb ekal ter makin' it. Then they *never* sets tharse'fs ter frustratin' the men on principle, jes' fur the enjyemint o' the thing, though *some* folks, ez don't know 'em ez well ez ye an' me, hev 'lowed wunst or twict sence the worl' began ez they air always ekal ter *that*. A leetle spindlin' snip o' a gal kin fool a man six feet high an' a two hunderd pounder 'bout ennythin' she gins her mind ter."

"That she kin!" sourly exclaimed Peter Bryce, whose infelicitous love affairs had been so widely bruited abroad, at the time when he and Maria White, subsequently Mrs. Bowles, quarreled, that reserve on the subject would have been but an empty formality.

"Oh, Pete, he 's jes' funnin'; he ain't hed no 'sperience o' thar onreliability," resumed Bassett, enraptured by the extent of his own satiric capacities when fairly tested, and having no mind to relinquish the floor of which he was so conspicuous an ornament. "Then they air so reasonable, — that 's what makes 'em so easy ter git along with. Ef enny one o' them war ter know 'bout what we air aimin' ter

do, an' ez we air ready ter hang them men ef we find Jake Baintree air arter enny mo' devilmint — sence he killed Sam'l Keale, an' got off from the court through the jedge an' jury bein' so all-fired weak-kneed, — what would that woman say? She 'd say, 'Don't hang 'em; it mought hurt 'em.' ”

There was a smothered guffaw from the younger men, and the father of the seven reasonless beings stood mute and without a word of contradiction.

“Don't hang 'em; it mought hurt 'em, — that air what every sistren of 'em in this broad land would say,” the speaker continued, in high feather, gratified by the flattering coincidence of the majority. “Now, Clem, ye kin bear me out,” he said, turning unexpectedly toward the young blacksmith, who gave so abrupt a start that the cat in the moonlit crevice rose up suddenly, with a back bowed high and an angry hiss; then, with her tail aloft and stiff she ran off with an unprecedented nimbleness, up the mound of hay, and composed herself to watch studiously a certain beam high out of reach, on which she had seen a lithe whisking shadow of rodent-like action. Clem heavily turned himself in the hay; he was swift to indorse mentally any plausible proposition, and he remembered anew with anxious self-reproach and many twinges of conscience his disclosures to Marcella. She had disapproved, as Bassett had urged that any woman would. Was it possible that she would act upon this disapproval? But after all, would she dare, and what could she do? He sought to solace his fears, and to shake off his overpowering sense of treachery and guilt, by arguing within himself the futility of any scheme she might devise; even circumstance seemed to favor him. He felt ashamed to experience a certain gratulation that her father, so vehement a stickler for the maintenance of the law, was not available in this emergency. “Eli be too sick fur her ter resk excitin' him 'bout sech. *She ain't goin' ter 'sturb Eli ef Jake Baintree war ter git hung, like he oughter hev*

been a year ago an' better, an' would hev been ef Teck Jepson hed hed his way."

He was summarily roused from these absorptions by Bassett's raucous drawl : —

"Why n't ye answer, Clem? Air ye a-snoozin' thar, ye sleepy-headed sorrel-top?"

"I hearn ye," replied Clem gruffly. "I dunno how *I* kin bear ye out. I dunno all the wimmen in the mountings, an' I don't want'er. Some will do one way an' some another; ennythin' ez air onexpected an' suddint."

"That's jes' it!" exclaimed Bassett. "The Bible 'lows ez the woman war made from one o' Adam's ribs, an' I'll be bound, though the Bible don't say so, ez her brains war jes' the odds and e-ends lef' over from Adam's brains, an' that's why her thoughts air jes' higglety-picklety; a leetle o' this, an' a tech o' that, an' none ter las' more'n a minit. An' she did n't shine on that 'casion in the Gyardin as an adviser, an' that's how it happens men ever sence hev been glad ter git shet o' thar wife's advice."

"I ain't never seen one woman ez larnt enny lesson from Eve," remarked Peter Bryce. "They gin thar advice yit ez ef 't war one o' the precious things o' the yearth, an' air always powerful 'stonished an' conflusticated every time ez the men folks ain't willin' ter break thar necks ter profit by it."

The sentinel had left the discussion, and reverted to the window; he beckoned to one of the other mountaineers presently, and pointed down the long avenue of the great oaks. Here and there were broad open spaces, where the moonlight fell in unbroken effulgence; the autumn winds had left the trees but scantily leaved; bough and bole were often distinct through the foliage, and even amidst the shadows, which duplicated each leaf and twig; the white frost lent an accentuation of brilliancy. Upon the sere grass a hoofbeat was falling, and an equestrian figure rode into full view; a mounted shadow beside him now lurked among

the trees; now skulked strangely foreshortened, on the ground; now rose suddenly upon the vertical surface of a crag into the full stature of a man and the complete equipment of a horse, with a definiteness that had an uncanny effect, somehow, in the solitude. So brilliant was the moon that it seemed to seek out and reveal vague, spectral, half-realized things, affinities of the night and the unknown.

"Edzac'ly, — jes' ez I said. Teck ridin' 'long like some great captain," exclaimed Bassett, whom the faint jingle of spurs in the frosty air had brought to the window.

The mounted figure passed close to the building, never lifting his head nor making a sign, although he must have been conscious of the men looking down at him. The horse whickered gleefully upon nearing the barn, and the rocks echoed and reëchoed the sound, until it simulated the distant, neighing of a squadron of cavalry. Even when it had sunk to silence, some seeming charger far away again broke the quiet, neighing in the solitary defiles of the mountain. The men looked at one another; here and there a spark of irritation, perceptible the moment that the horseman had first been glimpsed through the aisles of the woods, began to flare definitely into anger.

"Teck ain't keerin' how much n'ise he lets them men hear."

"He don't mind sech ez we-uns say; he air jes' sot an' sodden in his own way."

"He oughter be tuk down somehow. He air too robustious an' domineerin' ter live."

The scattered comments subsided the moment a step sounded upon the rungs of the ladder. As Teck Jepson emerged through the aperture in the floor, glancing up at the silent figures grouped about, watching his ascent, there seemed something in his eye which coerced apparent acquiescence, and in this fostered a sort of subservient dissimulation toward him. His grave "Howdy, neighbors," in his low, melancholy drawl, evoked a friendly "Howdy,

Teck," which seemed to express all the good-fellowship of approving welcome. Only Dake stood silent and morose, retaining in his manner something of the sentiment which had animated the coterie before Jepson's entrance. He could not have expressed a categorical opinion of Jepson's character, but was aware of his acute observation and his alert divination of motive, and felt sure that he could not have failed to notice the chill protest and displeasure in the single exception to the cordiality of the greetings. Thus Jepson's lofty indifference and serenity impressed him as in the nature of a triumphant retort, and presently Dake broke forth angrily :

"What air yer notion, Teck Jepson, ter kem ter a secret meetin', a-tromplin' an' a-jinglin' with spurs through the woods, an' ridin' of yer horse ez goes whinnyin' fur corn inter the stable. Ef I war Clem, I would n't give him nare grain. Ef them men hev enny ears, they air bound ter hear ye an' take a warnin'. I b'lieve ye air in league with 'em."

Jepson turned slowly upon him. "I b'lieve I'll throw ye out'n that winder," he said deliberately.

There was a hasty cry of protest from the group, and several interposed between the two. "Naw, Teck, naw; ye must n't git a-fightin', ye an' Gid!" exclaimed the father of the seven, with a patriarchal air which became him well at home, and in view of his seniority did not seem out of place here. "Ye know, boys, we-uns hev got tergethert ter hold up the right, whether the law will tote its e-end or no. It air fur the good an' the peace o' the kentry. We can't gin our cornsent ter wickedness goin' on an' dodgin' its due, but we'll meet up with it an' medjure it, sure. 'T won't do, ter git ter quar'lin', so jestice will be frustrated both in the courts an' out'n 'em. Ef the arm o' the law be got so spindlin' an' puny ez it can't take holt an' deal jestice, but flops par'lytic in the empty air, the people air strong yit, an' ain't goin' ter suffer no wrong-doin'. Naw, sir!"

He uttered this with a sing-song delivery, reminiscent of the pulpit of the circuit-rider, his voice rising and falling in alternate waves and with rhythmical cadences; then he suddenly assumed an indescribably coaxing tone, that had often proved exceedingly efficacious with recalcitrant small girls.

"Don't ye git ter quar'lin' with Gid, Teck! An' Gid, ye oughter be 'shamed! Teck 's our main man; he 's a plumb ringleader, an' ye know we air all bound ter b'lieve in Teck, wharfore or what not. I notice we-uns all do his bid, whether we aim ter or no. Teck ain't goin' ter git up no commotion ez them men kin hear. An' ez ter Teck be-in' in league with 'em, we-uns all know — everybody knows — ez he hev been plumb down on Jake Baintree ever sence the jury let him off; Teck 'lowed ez Jedge Lynch ought ter take his case up. Teck 's our main man!"

A frown had gathered on Jepson's face, distinctly seen in the moonlight which sifted through the dark shadows from the crannies of the high peaked roof. The peace-maker had touched some false note, and the jarring discord was instantly manifested. Jepson deliberately drew his arm from the grasp of the elder man.

"I ain't a-aimin' ter be a leader," he said. "I ain't sech ez covets the fust place. I hev no wish fur words of praise. I look within fur the testimony an' the voice o' the Lord ez sounds in the silences. Sech ez my steps air, they air tuk in His path."

He half turned from his well-meaning exhorter, who stood, a trifle crest-fallen but deeply impressed, still staring, the ligaments of his strong bare neck tense as he thrust his head forward.

Jepson paused, looking over his shoulder his luminous handsome eyes rested upon Dake with a more familiar and worldly expression than they had worn a moment ago.

"Ez ter Gid Dake, he air welcome ter his thoughts; his wust enemy would n't gredge him sech pore leetle things ez

he kin think. But ye air in an' about right ter gin rebukes fur quar'lin', — we ain't met fur sech ez that. An' I won't throw Gid out'n the winder jes' yit; but," he sneered, "let him think his thoughts. A body ought ter be sorry fur a man condemned ter pass his life in sech comp'ny ez Gid an' his thoughts."

The elderly peace-maker received the intimation that his interference was praiseworthy and well timed with a distinct and grateful glow. Dake, with his hands in his pockets and a flouting shrug of his shoulders, ejaculated, "Shucks!" and walked away amongst the others, quick enough, however, and sensitive enough to note the glances askance and the half-veiled contempt which marked the degree to which they considered him defeated, and the consequent depths to which he had sunk in their opinion.

"I rid, but I tuk a short cut through the woods, an' never teched the road nowhar," continued Jepson, standing in the middle of the floor, taller than them all, very distinct in the moonlight, "I rid bekase I war so all-fired late." It was unusual that he deigned to explain his motives, and this betokened an unwonted geniality and sense of nearness and oneness with them all. "It takes me mighty nigh the whole evenin' ter cook a leetle dab o' supper. My mother war the bes' cook ez ever seen a fire, but I don't 'pear ter take arter her. I actially can't turn a hoe-cake over." He smiled slightly at the laughter that this revelation of his domestic difficulties evoked. Then he went on: "Mos' folks rej'ice mightily when meal-times come, but it air a season o' hardship an' labor fur me. The skilletts an' the pans 'pear ter hide, somehows, an' I can't find nuthin'; though I aim ter put everythin' in its place, 't ain't thar whenst I want it agin."

"Ye miss Mis' Bowles cornsider'ble, don't ye?" suggested Bassett, with a leer, — "specially meal times."

"I never hearn Mis' Bowles war ennythin' so tremenjious s'prisin' ez a cook," sneered Peter Bryce, nettled at the very



mention of her name, and resolved not to indorse any presumable merits and culinary accomplishments.

But Teck Jepson had a sentiment of loyalty to the hospitable board, although it was self-interest that had spread it. "She never let me go hongry," he averred heartily, "an' that's more 'n I kin say fur myself."

"Ye oughter git married, Teck," said the champion of the fair. "A man 'thout a wife air like a house 'thout a h'a'th-stone: thar ain't no chances for comfort, nor cheerfulness, nor light, nor nuthin', 'thout it; it's jes' the heart o' a home."

"Yes; an' ye kin make mighty sure thar ain't a skillet in Brumsaidge Cove spry enough ter hide from Marcelly Strobe," broke in Dake irreverently, glad to touch upon a tender point; having heard and believed Andy Longwood's representations of Marcella's preference for Clem Sanders, and knowing that Teck Jepson had also been an aspirant for favor.

Jepson, with an angry start, was about to retort, when Clem Sanders, growling an oath, rose up from the hay, stamping heavily first one foot and then the other, to rouse them from the premature slumbers in which they had been surreptitiously indulging while the rest of his system was broad awake. "Air we-uns a-goin' ter stay hyar all night, a-colloguin' 'bout skillets an' sech, an' not even peekin' out o' the winder ter keep watch on them men at the forge? They could hev been at thar evil works, an' a-doin' a dunno-what-all in secret an' agin the law, an' we-uns air sech all-fired drivilin' idjits we can't ketch 'em, though we sets up night arter night a-watchin', kase we gits ter jawin' 'bout Eve an' Adam, an' skillets, an' Marcelly Strobe! Them men air mighty safe. I wisht I knowed I war a-goin' ter be ez fur off from harm an' hurt all my days. Them men air mighty safe, no matter what they air a-aim-in' an' a-plottin'; mighty safe from sech vengeance ez we-uns kin git tergether in Brumsaidge Cove."

It was seldom that Teck Jepson was affected by the speech of others, but the coercive influence of this logical outburst was very apparent in his manner, as he turned abruptly away, evidently terminating and casting off the whole previous train of thought, and strode to the window. As he stood there, the moonlight upon his clearly chiseled features, his full, deep eyes fixed with a searching intentness upon the dark little shanty of the forge down the road, his hand resting upon the handle of the pistol that he wore thrust in his belt, his high boots drawn over his trousers to the knee, his spurs catching the light and scintillating, albeit they were as motionless as if they had been the accoutrements of some sculptured soldier, there was so much agile strength suggested in his pose, so much fire and force in his face, earnest of the vassalage of circumstance to this full-pulsed spirit, that Clem Sanders, dolorously gazing, felt his heart sink within him. Teck Jepson had forgotten his enterprise, for the moment, and he himself had reminded him of it, forgetful in his turn of the horror that Marcella had expressed, and of his own protestations that no task she could impose would be too onerous for him to show his wish to please her. And now he had had but to hold his tongue, and the intruders might have come and gone while the vigilantes wrangled together in the loft; no bloodshed would darken this silver night, and Marcella's tender heart would be unwrung. "Me, ez 'lowed I'd shoot all these fellers an' run 'em off from hyar ter keep 'em from harmin' Jake Baintree an' that thar slouch of a blacksmith ez he hev got along with him!" he said, aghast at the rift between his performance and his protestations. He began to be appalled by the significance and consequence that now seemed to attend his hap-hazard speech and actions. He was not reflective, he had no habits of forecast and serious intention, and he felt enmeshed in troublous toils in the knowledge that he secretly wished to hinder that which he apparently sought to help forward. He would have given

much to recall his words. He had lost all desire to assist in adjudicating public affairs in the courts of Judge Lynch, to investigate the mystery of the intrusion into his own forge, even to punish the bungling smith that surreptitiously broke and mended; these things had become repugnant to him, under the knowledge of Marcella's disapproval. He stood for a few moments in the shadow, silently regarding Teck Jepson in the mellow splendor of the moonlight, that added its indefinite idealization to those advantages of symmetry and pose which Clem considered constituted a "powerful fine-built man." The blacksmith turned, slouching forward his heavy shoulders, a manner he affected when displeased and out of sorts, and which had an oddly aging effect, making him appear like some burly fellow of fifty or sixty, bent with toil and trouble. He flung himself, with a short sigh, into his former nest in the hay, and upheld his head on one hand. The moonlight had shifted since he last lay there. The hay that in the semi-obscurity retained its dull amber tint, tending here and there to a dusky brown or the nullity of invisibility, was in the light a fine and fibrous silver; it gleamed with lustrous reflections as he moved, and threw his head and face into distinct relief, despite the shadow of his hat-brim.

"Clem looks like ez ef he hed been a-feedin' on ten-penny nails as his daily fare," suggested Jube, the parson's son, who had lately come in, and who sat upon an inverted half-bushel measure. He was amusing himself by shelling an ear of corn, and dropping the grains through the cracks in the ill-laid flooring upon the little filly in the stall below, which he could see quite distinctly; the surprise of the little animal was varied by periodic panic and flight; she would return, however, to reëxamine the phenomenon, until, finally, Jube forced the empty cob through the crevice, hitting her fairly upon the head, when, with a terrified snort and an elastic bound, she disappeared, to come back no more.

Clem made no retort. He did not fail, however, so sharpened were his blunt perceptions, to notice that Teck Jepson, despite his preoccupation, glanced round at the sound of his name; he remembered, with an irritated sense of the grotesqueness of the mistake, that Jepson fancied him an accepted lover, and there was no relish in masquerading in this triumphant guise with so dreary and hopeless an identity within.

"What's the news from the forge, Teck?" demanded Jube, reaching out to the pile of corn for an ear to hold in readiness in case the filly should venture out again. Jepson once more turned to the window.

"All dark thar," he replied.

"Shucks!" said Jube easily, craning over the crevice in the floor in an effort to see the filly again, as if badgering the small denizen of the stall below were the praiseworthy errand which had brought him hither; he even broke off a bit of the ear of corn, and cast it down the cranny, in the hope that it might prove a lure. But the filly, though slow to learn, learned thoroughly, and his craft was in vain.

There was a sensation among the others that savored more of angry disappointment than their disinterested professions of seeking to promote the welfare and the peace of the community might justify. They became more sensible of the hardship of their long restraint, and manifestly chafed at being thus balked of the expected excitement. More than one was restively striding back and forth upon the quaking flooring, and between Dake and Bassett arose a somewhat clamorous controversy concerning the number of times that they had thus fruitlessly watched and waited.

"I ain't half awake in the daytime, stumblin' along arter the plow-tail or huntin' like somebody walkin' in thar sleep!" Bassett angrily exclaimed. "An' ef we-uns war the men we-uns purtend ter be, we'd go in the daytime, an' git Baintree off ter the woods, an' hang him then."

"Oh, shet up, Joe!" called out Clem from where he lay

half buried in the hay. He had scant imagination or sensitiveness, but his pulses had come to beat in sympathy with Marcella's sentiments, and he felt as it were by proxy the cold thrill of horror at the murderous words; his nerves were tense with a sense of resistance to the bloody-minded cruelty of the careless proposition. "Ye fairly make me hone ter git up an' beat that empty cymblin' o' a head off'n them narrer, spindlin' shoulders o' yourn."

He had not gauged the effect of his words. Before Bassett could reply Jepson whirled round, with a flash of the eye that was fiery even in the pallid moonlight.

"An' what ails *you-uns* ter take this suddint turn, Clem Sanders?" he demanded, his voice vibrant with scorn. "The las' time I hearn from you-uns ye war plumb crazed 'bout yer leetle tongs, — not kase they war bruk, but kase they hed been *mended*. 'Peared like 't would kill ye kase ye could n't approve o' that thar job. I war 'feard we could n't find a rope long enough nor a tree high enough ter hang the man ez war so gin ter pernicious ways ez ter fool with them leetle tongs. An' now ye 'pear not ter keer nuthin' 't all 'bout them desolated leetle tongs. Ye can't hold ter nuthin', Clem Sanders, an' ennybody ez puts thar 'pendence in ye air leanin' on a broken reed, — even ter shoein' a horse-critter, ef the truth war knowed."

Clem Sanders had palpably winced under this arraignment, despite his bluff courage, fearing that he had too definitely evinced his changed feeling, and that in some way it might result in eliciting the fact that he had divulged their plans to Marcella Strobe. He detected the influence of her fancied preference in the evident acrimony of Teck Jepson's sentiment toward him, but he was not moved to reply until the slur was cast upon his capacities as a blacksmith. Even in this moment of supreme emotion his simple art was dear to him.

"Whar 'll ye find a better blacksmith?" he cried, springing to his feet, and holding both arms outspread. "Whar 'll

ye find him? Tell me, an' I'll walk a hunderd mile ter see him!"

The dignity of the worker who loves his craft and does his utmost in its service was in his face and manner, as he stood, and served to neutralize his overweening vanity.

"Ef he war ter tell ye, ye would n't b'lieve him," said Dake discerningly, as Jepson turned slightly away, and Clem sank back once more into the deep, elastic meshes of the hay.

"Waal," Bassett resumed his objections, "air we-uns a-goin' ter keep this up till Christmus? An' what did we begin it fur? Ef it air perlite an' agreeable ter hang Bain-tree down hyar, why ain't it jes' ez perlite an' agreeable ter go git him up in the mountings? 'T would save time an' sleep, an' be jes' edzac'ly the same ter him."

"Hang him fur what?" demanded Teck Jepson succinctly.

Clem Sanders, with a galvanic start, turned his head as he lay in the masses of the hay, and stared at the speaker.

"Fur — fur — a-doin' of whatever he air a-doin' of," said Bassett, to whom a reputation for a logical, level head was by no means a cherished ambition.

Jepson shook his own head with an imperatively negative gesture. "We hev got ter find out ez he air arter some harm fust, — some wickedness ez air agin the interus' o' the kentry. He mought hev done nothin' wuss 'n fool with them leetle tongs; an' ef Clem's half the blacksmith he makes hisself out ter be, he ought ter be able ter fix 'em agin."

"Hang him fur a-killin' of Sam'l Keale, o' course," said Bassett casually, his unthinking face repulsive in its lack of any expression that might attest some protest of humanity, some reluctant though urgent and distorted sense of justice, as he paused in his striding to and fro, and stood in the illumined square of the window. "Ye always 'lowed 't war jestice."

"Not now!" cried Jepson vehemently, — "not now." He lifted a convincing forefinger, and laid it in the palm of the other hand at every point he made, as if telling it off. The other men, great, lumbering, massive figures in the silver-shotted dusk, gathered about him, watching with pondering intentness his gesture as he spoke, and slowly deliberating upon the subject-matter. "At fust, when the courts let him go, I 'pealed ter Jedge Lynch. But now he hev ez good ez got the promise o' the kentry on it. He hev been let ter go free an' 'thout fear, an' Brumsaidge hev 'peared ter cornsent ter the verdict o' the jury. An' arter six month an' better Brumsaidge can't turn around now an' say, 'I b'lieve I'll change my mind, bubby, an' hang ye arter all.' Naw; 'thout he hev done somethin' fraish, he'll hev ter go scot-free. An' 'tain't likely he hev done ennythin' agin ekal ter killin' Sam'l Keale."

Clem Sanders had slowly drawn himself into a sitting posture in the hay. He gazed at the speaker with startled, dilated eyes, his suddenly formed conviction taking fast hold upon his mind. In this reasoning, inconclusive though it was, he thought he saw that trait of mercy, of humanity, which Marcella had urged half heartedly upon him, and then let fall, since he could do naught, she said. Could Teck Jepson do more? He wondered if this were her decision. Had she thought Jepson more powerful? Had she appealed to him for the men she chose to befriend in the name of sheer humanity? How else could be explained this sudden elaborate construction of the acquiescence of Broomsedge Cove in the verdict of the jury? What careful argument was this for the delectation of lynchers, assembled for the purpose of defying quirks and palliations, and administering condign punishment for the deed done? He scanned the half-seen moonlit faces grouped about; there was on more than one a flouting indignation, and here and there a disappointed, blood-thirsty lower that he remembered to have seen in the unguarded look of a sheep-killing dog glimps-

ing a distant flock on a hill. But one trait made them all alike, — an expression of suspicious surprise. Had not Gideon Dake spoken more truly than he knew when he said that Teck Jepson was in league with those men? And if this were so, it was for Marcella's sake; and these words were almost trembling into sound upon the blacksmith's quivering, angry lips, as he rose up slowly and confronted Teck Jepson, still standing in the centre of the circle. There was something so significant in Clem Sanders's manner that they all turned expectantly toward him.

Keen, keen on the frosty air, incisive, iterative, metallic, fell the sudden stroke of a hammer on the anvil, and every pulse thrilled to the sound.



## XVI.

THE moment had come. That fact took precedence of every other impression, and annulled all the previous careful preparation. There was an instant rush toward the ladder, and the floor quaked beneath the swift but heavy feet. A voice checked the advance, that was like a rout in its wild, unreasoning motive power : —

“The fust man ez steps a foot on that thar rung, I’ll let the light through him !”

There was a sharp, decisive click, and the lynchers knew that Teck Jepson had cocked the pistol, which he wore no longer in his belt, but held in his right hand, as he stood beside the aperture in the floor.

A momentary hovering about it, a sound of quick, excited panting, and the massive figures fell back a little.

“Why n’t ye say who air ter go fust, then ?” exclaimed Bassett, in angry reproach. “Ye air too durned sot in yer way ter live, Teck Jepson. Ef we war right smart, we’d hang ye a leetle before we set out ter settle them t’ other men.”

“Don’t quar’l, boys, — don’t quar’l,” urged the paternal peace-maker. “Teck knows jes’ what we’d bes’ do.”

There was scarcely a murmur of dissent to this, for the usurper is more imposing than he who wields delegated authority, in that his supremacy is the trophy and the triumph of his own bow and spear. These wild and lawless men might hardly have accorded so ready an obedience to Teck Jepson’s mandate, had his power been conferred by the State of Tennessee.

“Ye’ll stay right hyar till ye air wanted,” he said des-

potically. "I be goin' ter take one man an' go down ter see what they air a-doin' of. Ef I fire my pistol, ye kin come, the whole bilin' of ye, ez hard ez ye kin travel. Me an' one man will go fust."

"I be that man!" cried Clem Sanders turbulently.

Jepson could hardly say him nay, since he was the first to volunteer. But his objection showed very plainly in his eyes, and the blacksmith sturdily responded to it.

"It's *my* forge!" He protested his special interest.

"Laws-a-massy, yes! an' it's *yer* leetle tongs, too!" sneered Jepson, with the scorn of one who cares little for material possessions, as he took his way down the ladder.

Clem followed, and as the two emerged from the shadowy barn upon the frost-whitened sward below and into the full splendor of the moonlight, they were conscious of the eyes that pursued them from the window above. Once Jepson turned his head and glanced over his shoulder. It was not a reassuring sight, even to one whom it in no manner threatened, — that broad, low window of the simple log-barn, filled with the bearded, eager faces of silent armed men, some half crouching, others standing that they might look over the shoulders of those in front. Behind them all was visible, the hay piled to the roof, here silver skeins in the light, and again full of shadows and indefinite suggestions of depth.

As the two walked on together, Jepson took note of the moon in the sky. "Ain't it some earlier 'cordin' ter the moon than 't war that night when ye say ye kem so nigh ter ketchin' 'em?"

"Dunno," panted Clem. "I hev hed suthin' else ter do, sence then, than ter stare-gaze the moon."

The tone of the retort arrested Jepson's attention. He had hitherto taken little account of his rival's mental attitude toward him. As he turned his head, and, though still walking forward, looked at Clem, he could scarcely interpret his expression. Antagonism he could read, to be sure,

in the hard-set jaw, the gleam of his teeth between his half-parted lips, the glitter of his eye ; but a sort of uncertainty was shadowed in his manner, with a tumultuous, fluttering excitement, a badgered, hopeless, yet still struggling anxiety, — he could not account for these in the light of the present surroundings. A much wiser man could hardly have divined the turbulent perplexity that surged through Clem's mind, the coercive rigors of decision and yet the wild regret for whatever course he took. He seemed to himself to be living at a climax. Every breath he drew chronicled an emergency. He was in the clutch of contradictions, the victim of distorted and strangely reversed circumstances. He had set the machinery of vengeance in motion again when it had seemed to flag, and he had wished to hinder. He had forced himself upon Teck Jepson as his lieutenant in this abhorrent enterprise, hoping that in the guise of lending him aid he might be able to frustrate him utterly. Yet he was beginning to perceive that, should his scheme in aught go awry, it would seem to Marcella as if he had been foremost and active in the participation in the deed which she deemed an infamous cruelty, and which her father accounted a crime. His senses reeled as he sought to escape his dilemma. He wished himself back at the barn, leaving Jepson to conduct the affair at his own imperious will, and he wondered futilely and bitterly why he should have come forth at all in obedience to an impulse so strong, but so unreasoning. What had he, in his folly, expected to do ? What could it avail to keep by Jepson's side, and hold him under surveillance ? He realized acutely that his simple brain was no instrument for clever scheming, — that every course of action which he sought to plan had only its preliminary impulse, thereafter dwindling to vague nullity in lieu of logical sequences. Nevertheless, he caught himself ever and anon casting sidelong glances at Teck Jepson, informed with a wild inclination to spring upon him unaware, and stifle his cries, and overbear him —

for what? Even the futureless Clem could look forward far enough to anticipate the sallying forth of the reserves at the barn after so long a time, in default of any sign from the leader of the expedition.

"I don't want'er stan' in Jake Baintree's shoes," he muttered, forecasting their fury if balked. His tone, though so low, was audible, so silent was the night, to the man who walked by his side.

Jepson cast a glance of deep objection upon him.

"His shoes air mebbe powerful safe foot-gear," he returned. "It depends on what he be a-doin' of, an' what sort'n account he kin gin o' hisself. Ye air jes' like them men yander;" he nodded his head backward toward the barn. "They 'pear ter rate tharse'fs with a pack o' hounds arter a wild critter what they hev got a nateral right ter pull down. They fairly yelled ez ef they had struck the trail o' deer or bar, whenst they hearn that hammer fust tech the metal."

Clem Sanders suddenly lost his scanty self-control.

"I know whar ye got all that thar fine talk from," he flared out in jealous rage. "Powerful nice an' perlite ter be a-comparin' baptized Christians ter hounds an' sech. Ye been a-talkin' ter Marcelly Strobe. Them's her very words."

The next moment, the tide of suspicion that had rolled in so tumultuously upon him was ebbing gradually. Once more he was to learn the irrevocability of a word given to the air. The idea that sound-waves, once astir, infinitely vibrate to perpetuate a record, albeit too subtle for mortal ear, was not even a vague theory with him, but he experienced in some sort its practical illustration. Teck Jepson had paused in the road, smitten motionless in amazement, and the inadvertent Clem saw gradually dawning in his eyes, widely opened and speculatively fixed upon him, the counterpart of the view which he himself had entertained. The inference was too plain for him to hope that it might

be passed over. It was now not difficult to divine his confidences, and where they had been bestowed. It was evident, too, that with these words Marcella had received them.

Jepson said nothing. He still stood where he had paused, the moonlight a burnished glitter upon the barrel of the pistol that he held in his hand. His face, white in the pallid sheen, was reflective. He gazed now, not at Clem Sanders, but beyond him, into the vague shimmer of the frost amongst the black shadows of the woods; the curled dead leaves on the ground held within their curves the fine sparkling incrustation; every bramble of the undergrowth close by the roadside showed lines of silver gleams, and through the heavy interlacing boughs of the gigantic trees above their heads, rising high into the clear air, came the crystalline scintillation of the stars. Encircling all, the mountains stood sombre and lofty, sharply defined against the sky; adown the road the heavy shadows gloomed; suddenly, athwart them a red light flared, and the sigh of the bellows breathed forth. Teck Jepson, reminded of their destination, turned abruptly from the road, which they had hitherto followed, into the undergrowth of the woods.

"Bes' take ter the bresh," Jepson remarked in an undertone. "They mought hev set a lookout ter watch the road."

Despite its denudation by the autumnal storm, the "brush" still afforded a dense covert, by reason of the young growth of the pines, whose lower branches jutted out level with the ground, and the predominance in its midst of the ever-green laurel. The crestfallen Clem kept close at Jepson's heels, as he pushed cautiously through the shrubs, laden with the white rime and glittering with the moon. Now and again some dry fallen bough cracked beneath Clem's careless, heavy tread, and thorns of stripped bushes caught and tore his garments, the rending of the

fabric loud in the dumbness of the windless autumn night. And when this chanced Jepson cast over his shoulder a warning glance, imposing silence and heed, so freighted with the spirit of their expedition, so oblivious of all else, that Clem, preposterously hopeful, began to breathe more freely. Surely he had not so definitely committed himself as he had feared. In the excitement of the moment, he perchance did not distinguish between what he thought and what he said. Jepson doubtless had not comprehended; had he not stood like a stock in the road and stared, motionless and mute? When he saw Jepson pause beneath the gnarled, low-hanging boughs of a chestnut, gray with lichen, and here and there glimmering icily as if in presentiment of the coming snows, this idea had so possessed him that he had no apprehension that his coadjutor had aught of significance to say.

Jepson lifted grave, intent eyes as Clem came stumbling up. He was leaning, as he waited, against the tree. His hat was thrust far back, and his face was all unshaded; it seemed melancholy, but the light was pensive, and his voice had always those falling inflections.

"She war agin it, then," he said, and the tone had none of the spirit of interrogation.

Clem took an unguarded step backward, recoiling as if he had been struck. Then he clumsily recovered his equilibrium, standing unsteadily on the uneven ground. He made some feint of self-defense.

"Who air ye a-talkin' 'bout?" he demanded gruffly, slouching his heavy shoulders forward and fixing his long, narrow, gleaming eyes surlily on Jepson.

"Marcelly Strobe," Jepson answered promptly. "Ye said she 'lowed them men war like hounds on a trail. She war agin 'em, then."

Clem made still another desperate effort to shield himself. "She said some men — ginerally. How 'd she know cunny-thin' 'bout our goin's on?"

"How 'd she know? Kase ye told her," retorted the discerning Jepson. "An' it air ez much ez yer life air wuth."

This knowledge, familiar enough to his own consciousness, became doubly impressive and coercively veracious in another man's words. Clem Sanders, stout-hearted as he was, felt the sudden thrill of panic. It sharpened his faculties.

"It air jes' ez likely ye told her ez me — *ef she knows*," he equivocated. "Hyar ye air, a-dilly-dallyin' in the woods, 'feard ter move hand or foot, doubtin' 'bout whether she air agin it or no. I ain't showed ez I set no sech store by sech ez she thinks or don't think. Ef ennybody told her, it mought jes' ez well hev been *you-uns*."

Jepson's reproachful and surprised gaze dealt a poignant wound to Clem's careless conscience, but it failed to elicit confession. "Ef *she* won't tell, the Lord knows *I* won't," he thought, but knowing his uncontrollable tongue, he was glad that Jepson began to speak of himself.

"I ain't one ter falter fur sech ez others say," protested Jepson, "though I ain't got the pleasure in this hyar business ez folks in the old time 'peared ter take. Them in the Bible never turned fur the sight o' blood, an' they hung folks an' chopped 'em into minch meat, an' seemed ter find a savor in sech doin's ez all my religion can't gin! I can't holp feelin' sorter sorry fur the evil-doer wunst in a while, specially whenst the avenger air hard on his track; fur my heart is weak an' needs strengthenin' from above. The men o' this day air pore, degenerate critters, an' don't sense jestice much more 'n Marcelly Strobe. But my hand air nerved by a stronger power 'n I kin command, an' I dare all the mountings ter show the road whar I tuk the back-track, or tell the day."

He turned, resolutely pushing on toward the forge, and Clem Sanders, greatly cast down and too much troubled to even glance toward the future, kept at his elbow.

The ringing clamor of the hammer came to them again as they pressed on, not regular, but with fitful pauses ; and by the time that they were at the verge of the woods they heard voices, loudly conversing, casual voices. The tones came from the forge, and alternated with the clink of the hammer.

The next moment the little low-browed log shanty was before them, seen through the arching vistas of the laurel and the oak ; its slanting roof glistened with moisture ; the crag loomed high above, with the sentinel pines on its summit. Beyond the valley the dark mountains, black but for dusky olive-green suggestions, were visible against the horizon ; and the moon, a sphere of gleaming pearl, swung high in the violet sky. The long path of light it shed upon the river stretched from bank to bank and seemed to part the dark lustrous waters, and Jepson bethought himself of that miraculous road in the midst of the Red Sea, when Israel trod its ways dry shod, with the waves like a wall on either hand. In front of the forge, a feeble red flare alternated with a fleeting brown flicker as the sigh of the bellows again broke forth. When, suddenly, the two vigilantes stood in the broad, open doorway, a man was at the anvil once more, and its keen, fine vibrations rang out responsive to the shrill tone of the hand-hammer, for he had no striker.

He did not move, for all he must have seen their eager eyes fastened upon him.

"Hey !" he cried out, with a gay intonation, not intermitting his labors. "Hello !"

That he was a stranger, a man of medium size and slenderly built, bending over the anvil in the shadow, since the fire languished for the lack of the breath of the bellows, was the merely momentary impression made upon Jepson's mind. His eyes fell upon a woman sitting on an inverted keg in the red light of the dusky, half-illuminated room ; he did not recognize her instantly, although she rose at once and advanced upon them.

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Clem Sanders stepped back, a look of astounded doubt, as if he could not believe his eyes, contending with the certainty in his face. For the woman was his mother.

"Waal, I hev hunted fur ye, an' hunted," she addressed him in a tone of acrid exasperation. "An' I hollered an' hollered. An' I sent leetle Silas hyar" — she pointed to a small nephew of Clem's, a frequent visitor at the blacksmith's house, whom Jepson had not seen until this moment, a tow-headed urchin of twelve, who sat in a crouching position on the hub of a broken wheel which lay on the floor — "ter hunt fur ye, an' he could n't find ye. Hyar's a strange man in the Cove kem up ter the house a-sarchin' fur ye, an' wantin' a leetle job o' blacksmithin' done, an' ye can't be rooted out from nowhar!"

She was a tall, angular, thin-faced woman, with an expression of gravity and care in her lined features, and she had a tone that boded the rigors of domestic inquisition as she demanded, "Whar hev ye been?"

Clem's wildly anxious glance at his tools in the stranger's hands availed nothing. The account of himself was evidently the essential preliminary.

Jepson touched his shoulder with his own as a secret warning, as they stood side by side in the door of the forge, but had the disclosure been far more significant the hap-hazard Clem would have nevertheless blurted it out as he did.

"In the barn," he replied.

"Ye air tellin' a story," his mother retorted, with a manner reprehensive certainly, but with a coolness as if contemplating an offense of infinitely multiplied precedents. "I sent leetle Silas ter the barn, an' he 'lowed ye warn't thar, though he hearn harnts talkin' in the loft, an' they made him 'feard. An'," lifting her bony arm, shaking her forefinger, and lowering her voice impressively, as if fairly cornering him, "I sent him *agin* ter climb up inter the loft, ez no harnts would hurt him with me so nigh, an' he kem back, an'," triumphantly, "he say ye warn't thar, nuther."

The small Silas, disingenuous beyond his years and size, turned his eyes, which were of a very light color, and with a superabundance of white, that made them marked even in the duskiness, with a pleading apprehensiveness upon his uncle, but the excited, confused Clem was quaking, even at this moment, with the danger overpast. How closely discovery had approached the vigilantes in the barn! He had not his wits sufficiently about him to reproach his mother for believing the deceptive Silas rather than himself.

"Whar hev ye been?" she demanded anew. Then with the impetus of her long pent-up rebukes constraining her she went on without waiting for an answer.

"Hyar be this hyar man, obligated ter hev his tools mended, kase his work calls him betimes ter-morrer by daylight, an' him a stranger in the Cove, an' he 'lowed mebbe he mought git a leetle blacksmithin' done, though 't war arter dark, bein' ez his work called him far up in the mountings by daylight. An' me an' Silas kem down hyar ter see ef we-uns could find yer tools, bein' ez ye war nowhar, so ez he could patch his pick hisse'f. He 'lowed he knowed suthin' 'bout blacksmithin' " —

"Mighty leetle, I'll be bound!" cried Clem, his professional consciousness restored by this arrogation on the part of the stranger. He dropped the hang-dog look that he had worn under his mother's lecture, and strode with his habitual easy, confident air across the room and stood beside the anvil, watching the amateur smith's performance with an air of silent, repressed ridicule and half-smiling scorn.

"Go ahead," he observed, with affected encouragement, as the young stranger looked up and hesitated. "What air ye goin' ter do now, — het it some mo'?" as the other turned doubtfully toward the fire. "Ho! ho!" with a manner of bluff superiority. "Shucks! Git out o' the way, my frien'. Lemme show ye what blacksmithin' air."

He shouldered the stranger summarily from his own post at the anvil, then paused to take up the bit of iron, on which

the amateur had been working, and shook his head smilingly, as if with an unspeakable contempt, as he carefully surveyed this handiwork. He turned and thrust it amongst the coals, evidently rejecting it as a mere beginning, and starting the process anew.

"I'm willing," the stranger said, with a laugh, as if accepting good-naturedly this cavalier criticism; and Jepson, divined that he did not consider proficiency at the anvil the chief object of existence. The amateur smith, however, offered to work the bellows, but Clem, with a contemptuous "Don't take two men ter do a leetle job like this," discouraged further proffers of assistance, and then bent himself to the work with as complete an absorption as if there were no band of expectant, eager, bloodthirsty men waiting at the barn for a signal, and as if Teck Jepson's presence, as he stood in the door, were not more significant than his daily loitering there.

The white light of the fire flaring up as Clem worked the bellows with one hand, while holding the metal in the coals with the other, revealed the stranger to the scrutiny of Jepson, who, recovering from his surprise, was taking due note of him. He sought to be just; to contend with mere suspicion; to separate his consideration of the subject from the personal interest that persistently linked itself with the circumstances. How much had Marcella known? Had she taken any action in the matter? And with what motive? He could not banish these thoughts, however, as he gazed at the stranger, who leaned against the elevated hearth, affecting to watch the smith's work, but with a tense, alert attitude, and a wary eye that ever and anon furtively sought the silent figure standing in the broad, moonlit doorway, with the dark landscape, silver-flecked, vaguely visible in the background. His light hair made his head very definite against the black and sooty hood of the forge. Now and then he put up a slender hand, and pulled his long, yellow mustache with a gesture and man-

ner alien to the mountains. His attitude and garb, the very shape of his boot, marked and individualized him. He was not of the region.

None of this did Clem Sanders observe as he worked. Once he held up the precious little tongs. "This is yer doin'," he said reproachfully, indicating a small protuberance where the piece, broken off, had been welded on again.

The stranger burst into a laugh, showing his strong white teeth beneath his yellow mustache. A pleasant face he had, with this more jovial expression upon it. Clem Sanders's frown relaxed as he looked at him.

"So you've found me out, have you? This ain't the first time I've been here," he said easily.

And then, although it might not be said how it was done, for there was not a perceptible lifting of an eyelid nor a hair's-breadth turning of the head, Teck Jepson was aware that the stranger had covertly noted the effect of the words upon him. Already he had made the distinction between the two men as to which was to be feared.

"Yes, that's a fac'!" cried Mrs. Sanders, with an unwonted animation. The singular event in her dull experience had roused a not unpleasurable excitement, and she had regarded the absorption of the two at the anvil with a reluctant sense of being shut out from continued participation, and having reached a finality. The allusion to the past revived her capacity for extracting interest from the circumstance. "What d'ye think, Clem? This hyar man 'lows ez one night, not so long ago, he started over the mountings, ter kem down hyar ter git his pickaxe mended, — it war bruk, — an' he los' his way, an' miscalc'lated his time somehows, an' 't war middlin' late 'fore he got hyar. An' he kem ter the house, an' knocked an' knocked, an' never roused up nobody. So — ha, ha!" the detail seemed to commend itself to Mrs. Sanders's sense of humor, as she sat bolt upright on the keg of nails and recounted; "so ez he war goin' back he passed by hyar, an' a suddint thought

streck him : he jes' kindled up the fire, — thar war a few coals lef' alive, — an' mended his tool hisse'f. He say he jes' wondered what we-uns would hev said ef we hed woke, an' seen the light an' hearn the hammer ! I'd hev 'lowed 't war Satan, or a harnt, one."

She folded her arms, and with a deft motion of her head shook her sun-bonnet a little further back, that she might turn her smile upon the stranger ; not so pleasing a demonstration as its good-nature might have desired to make it, for she had lost several of her front teeth, and those that were left were conspicuous in their isolation. It showed Teck Jepson that the stranger had succeeded in winning her good opinion ; and even Clem, more thoroughly informed though he was, lifted his eyebrows and looked significantly at his coadjutor, evidently accepting this candid and obvious explanation of the mystery. Jepson began to see that he need expect nothing but hindrance from both mother and son, and that the least plausible wiles might prove efficacious to hoodwink these simple souls. He still stood in the doorway, but leaning against its frame, his arms folded across his broad chest, his hat far back on his head ; and although he often gazed up speculatively at the moon, whose light was full in his face, he saw that the stranger still held his every movement under notice, and gave him the attention of a speculative glance after every phrase, as if seeking to judge how it impressed him.

The pause was broken only by a cricket, in some sheltered nook among the eaves, and a wheezing coughing that Silas presently set up, as if some of the lies he had told were choking him ; as he crouched on the hub of the broken wheel. But when Mrs. Sanders remarked, that she would give him some hoarhound when she got him to the house, he contrived to swallow them all, and relapsed into wide-eyed silence.

"That was the time I broke the tongs. I was here once besides," said the stranger, who seemed to feel more and more at ease.

"Ye don't say!" exclaimed Mrs. Sanders, who evidently thought the intrusions a great joke.

"Waal, stranger," said Teck Jepson, and the man's nerves became tense and his face rigid and watchful the moment the melancholy, drawling, mellow voice sounded on the air, "what mought yer work be on the mounting?"

Mrs. Sanders cast a glance of indignant reproof at her neighbor, for the slightest manifestation of curiosity concerning another's affairs is a flagrant breach of mountain etiquette.

But the stranger answered quickly, as if he were prepared to meet the question and glad to have it asked. He had a sudden, sharply clipped method of enunciation, doubly marked in contrast with the mountaineer's elongation of the vowels. His words were even more compact and staccato than their wont.

"I'm prospecting, — prospecting for silver."

There was a momentary silence. Even Clem held the hammer poised for an instant, while the iron glowed on the anvil, and looked contemptuous comment from out his long, narrow, twinkling eyes. Mrs. Sanders observed, "Law, stranger, ain't ye got no better sense 'n that? Thar *ain't* no silver in these mountings, — leastwise none the yearth's a-goin' ter spare. Jes' enough ter fool fellers inter wastin' thar time."

"An' breakin' the p'int's off'n thar good pickaxes," added Clem, examining the implement with some interest; "fust-rate one, too, — oughter las' ye a long time."

Jepson watched the stranger color with vexation; then recovering himself he casually observed, "I reckon may be I'll come up with a little silver, after a while; indications are first-rate."

"Thar war a man," Jepson began abruptly, "he lived hyarabouts five year ago an' better — he b'lieved thar war silver hyar. He got put down in the mouth of a cave; his partner done it; he war n't seen no more."

The stranger's light brown eyes were all afire. He leaned forward, and held out one arm to Jepson. "Say!" he exclaimed, "do you know where that exact cave is?"

Jepson turned an impassive look upon him. "Dunno the edzac' spot, an' don't want ter know."

A patent disappointment was on the stranger's face. Then he said, "I ain't one of the kind that gets put down in caves; you need n't be uneasy about me."

This was something in the nature of a flippant retort. He was evidently sorry for it immediately afterward, and there was a deprecatory expression on his face as he looked at Jepson, who, however, showed no sign of feeling of any sort as he inquired, —

"Who did ye hev ter strike fur ye when ye kem ter the forge? Could ye do sech work by yerself?"

He fixed his contemplative eyes on the stranger's face. It was not an ingenuous face, but the circumstances were coercive, and it showed the heed, the fear, the vacillating hope, that animated him as he replied, "Yes, I had Jake Baintree to strike for me."

His lips were dry. He bit the nether one hard as he looked at Jepson, seeing in his eyes that he understood much, — much that was not said.

For Jepson knew well that this man had been warned, and that he had flung himself for safety upon the truth, perchance with some slight admixture, realizing that the boldness of innocence alone could rescue him. As to Baintree, it was eminently in character that he should cringe, and cower, and lurk in hiding, knowing that the investigation by vigilantes impended.

Nevertheless, despite Clem's confidences to Marcella and the warning which she had doubtless conveyed, it was evident that the facts could be elicited here and now as well as if the men had been taken by surprise. The stranger made no resistance to the inquiry, and this indicated that he recognized its inevitable character, and had not sought to shirk

it. Jepson went on steadily, unmoved by any consideration save the effort to perform his duty to the organization that had intrusted him with his mission. But notwithstanding its paramount interest, it seemed secondary in importance, in Clem's estimation, to the necessity of forging the bit of metal on the anvil, and the subsequent conversation took place annotated by his ringing blows, from which the stranger, his nerves on the rack, palpably recoiled, but which had scant effect on the more impassive mountaineer, save to induce him to slightly lift his voice.

"How long hev ye been bidin' in the mountings?"

"Since August."

"Dell-law!" commented Mrs. Sanders. "Ye hev kep' yerse'f mightily ter yerse'f; I'll say that fur ye."

The logical inference might be that she commended his magnanimity in sparing them his society. But the good woman meant nothing of this kind, her exclamation being simply a rural formula.

"Who hev ye bided with?" demanded Jepson.

The stranger colored slightly. Then making an effort to put the matter in its most favorable aspect, he replied with some show of communicativeness:—

"With Baintree. You see I was his doctor—I am a physician by profession—when he was in jail in Glaston, the regular jail-physician being ill himself, and Baintree told me about the silver mine he thought he had discovered. So I came to see if it were true. I happen to know something about mining. But Jake,—he's a queer fish,—he was n't willing for anybody to know what we were after. I believe he never tells me truly where his best find was; he thinks somebody will chouse him out of it yet."

"Ez ef ennybody would hev it," exclaimed Mrs. Sanders, with sweeping contempt, "an' ez ef thar war enny ter hev!"

"Whar hev ye bided with him?" asked Jepson, seemingly all unaffected by any phase of the detail.



"Waal, Teck Jepson!" cried Mrs. Sanders, scandalized by his curiosity, as she construed his persistence, "ye mus' hev hed yer tongue iled. I hev never hearn sech a lot o' whys an' wharfores ez it hev got on ter the e-end o' it ter-night."

But the catechumen responded at once, scarcely waiting for her to finish her sentence. "We stayed for a while in a deserted house, — the old Jepson house, he said it was."

"His'n!" broke in Mrs. Sanders, identifying the locality joyously, and pointing Jepson out still more unmistakably with a long, bony index-finger.

"Is it yours?" said the young stranger. "Well, the owner came and fired out our traps, one day, while we were gone, so we went to another deserted cabin, up near the summit of the mountain."

"Mighty cur'ous way ter be a-livin'," commented Mrs. Sanders, with a very definite infusion of scorn. "An' fur a silver mine, ez mought be in the mountings, an' then agin mought n't. Look-a-hyar, stranger, ain't ye 'quainted with nobody in Brumsaidge Cove mo' 'spectable 'n Jake Baintree?"

There was a sudden triumph in the young man's face. He shook himself free from his unpalatable confessions, as if they had been a cloak falling from his shoulders. "I'm acquainted with some very respectable people, — very good people. I'm well acquainted with the Strobe family."

He had lived somewhat in the world, and was aware that in some places people have been known to prop their social standing by bragging of their acquaintances. He had never thought that this necessity would supervene for him in Broomsedge Cove.

"Dell-law!" exclaimed Mrs. Sanders, seeming as delighted to meet the Strobes in the desolation of the stranger's social circle — which had consisted, apparently, of Jake Baintree — as if she had encountered them in the solitude of a desert island. "Old Mis' Strobe!"

"Yes, old Mrs. Strobe," he said, "and the young girls, Miss Marcella and little Isabel."

The impartial, judicial interest with which Teck Jepson had listened gave way suddenly. His eyes were deeply glowing, and fastened intently on the stranger's face. His cheek had flushed darkly. Somehow the idea of the warning that Marcella had conveyed had suggested to his mind no personal association. She had told Baintree, perhaps, he had thought, or she had sent a message. But her name upon the stranger's lips — the very sound of it odd and incongruous, with his unfamiliar accent and the unwonted and punctilious title — intimated abruptly the possibility of a personal interest, of a longer acquaintance, of a future of which Jepson had never dreamed. She had risked much, — with the transparent blacksmith to know that she was in possession of the secret, — she had risked much. And what a dapper, slender, handsome young fool was this silver hungry stranger!

"An' Eli!" cried Mrs. Sanders in a shrill crescendo of pleasurable reminiscence.

"I never knew him before he was injured. But I had a long talk with him this evening, and" — he drew out his watch composedly — "I promised him that I would come back if not too late, after I got through at the forge here. A very respectable family, and very hospitable."

## XVII.

IN Clem Sanders's ingenuous face was expressed at this moment a sudden illogical, full-fledged anger and doubt, as in the slow processes of his brain was revolved the idea of the stranger's claim to consideration on the score of a friendship with the Strobe family. He repudiated it as a figment. The normal repulsion for a cold-blooded lie, as he fancied this to be, chilled even his good nature. He had been weak, he knew, in treacherously revealing the secrets of his associates to Marcella, and he had incurred thereby heavy risks. He was willing, since it was her wish, that this folly should be utilized to save the man's life. But he had revolted from sharing in the subsequent deceptions, from the double-masked character which he was forced to assume, one of the chief of the vigilantes and the secret ally of the culprit. His conclusions had a certain quality of absolute conviction, which triumphantly dispensed with logic.

"Ye don't know the Strobe fambly!" he said suddenly. "Ye never hearn o' nare one o' 'em till this evenin' in yer born days, — 'thout 't war through yer frien' Jake Baintree's vaporin's an' maunderin's 'bout folks he ain't fit ter 'sociate with. Eli bein' a candidate fur office so frequent, he hev a heap o' wuthless folks a-hangin' round him, created by God A'mighty fur nuthin' in this worl' but ter vote at the polls. Naw, sir! ye ain't reg'lar 'quainted with none o' the Strobe fambly!"

He had ceased to work at the anvil. His brow showed several corrugations in straight lines, his eyebrows were elevated, his narrow, long eyes were grave, his square jaw was hard set. He still held the uplifted hammer in his hand,

and as a specimen of physical force he might have been somewhat awe-inspiring to the slightly built stranger ; but the paramount impression which he received was that this was Marcella's informant, whose name she had not disclosed, — this bold and inconsequent Vulcan, the traitor to the League of Vigilantes.

"Now crow a little louder, my cock, and I'll have *your* friends wring *your* neck, in short order !" he said to himself, feeling still master of the situation.

Outwardly he was dumb, silently marking the blacksmith's demonstration with watchful eyes, leaning against the elevated hearth, the tips of his fingers thrust in the pockets of his trousers.

"Clem Sanders," said the blacksmith's mother, much displeased, "nuthin' in this worl' air so becomin' ter a fool ez a shet mouth. Then folks kin only jedge o' what God A'mighty war in his wisdom disposed ye should look like."

But Clem, usually a dutiful son, gave her no notice.

"I'm a-reelin' ye ouf cornsider'ble line, ennyhow," he continued. "I'll haul ye in, though, in about three shakes o' a dead sheep's tail, ef ye go ter tryin' ter purtend ez ye an' Jake Baintree air favored guests yander at Strobe's."

For the sake of carrying out the theory on which he had conducted his share in the episode, the stranger, feigning to understand no more than the surface of affairs might betoken, lifted his eyebrows as in surprise, and shrugged his shoulders with a sophisticated gesture intimating a facile concession.

"I meant no offense, I'm sure ; I should n't have mentioned it. I had no idea the Strobes were so exclusive !" He could not have forborne this fling, had his life depended on his withholding it. "But, my good fellow, don't question me. Ask them if *they* know *me*. They will tell you, and as you are so polite you will certainly believe them."

The blacksmith lowered at him, the red light of the dwindling forge fire on his broad face and bare throat and

herculean arm. Only a portion of the reply was intelligible to him, but he caught the covert satire it conveyed, and the method of glib enunciation, with quick, flexible motions of the eyelids and lips, the alert turn of the head, the gleam of innuendo in the eye implying bridled retorts that chafed at the curb of fear, all repelled him. He felt a sudden ebbing away of confidence, of his credulity. He began illogically to doubt every statement the stranger had made. Even the pick in his hand — how well it was mended, better than new ; the goodly handicraft ! — was in some sort a blind, a disguise, a subterfuge. He frowned more darkly still as he sought to divine the rascality that must lurk behind this feint of mining.

Mrs. Sanders, still sitting on the keg, yawned with a somnolent vocal refrain, and then rose stiffly to her feet ; this gesture roused little Silas from a state of galvanic jerks and nods in which he had been indulging, his white eyeballs quite eclipsed, or now and then half showing unnaturally upturned. He began to rub his eyes violently as he shuffled up from his seat on the hub, taking scant notice of the fact that where there is a hub, spokes are of the vicinage ; he stumbled over one or two of these, and fell in sprawling fashion almost to the door. “Thar, now ! What did I tell ye !” Mrs. Sanders exclaimed acridly. And yet she had not told him anything.

But Silas, who had voice enough for much loud whooping, when such demonstrations were timely, seemed to be frugal in volume on ordinary occasions, and it was in a very thin wheeze that he made haste to stipulate that he “war n’t hurt nowhar,” in a manner that implied that if he were injured he might expect to have his bruises multiplied at the hands of Mrs. Sanders, by way of annotating the lesson he had received to take more care.

Mrs. Sanders wore a disaffected air. All her interest in the events of the evening had evaporated in the prospect of a wrangle among the young men. She was of pacific prin-

ciples, although her practices were not such as always tended to preserve the peace of the neighborhood, since she arrogated the prerogative of censorship in many particulars, and earnestly resented the right of reciprocation. If angry words were to be spoken, she liked them best of her own framing, and zealously and fearlessly applied them. But she sincerely deprecated a quarrel that was not of her own making, and her second yawn as candidly denoted that she was bored as her first.

“Ef ye boys air a-goin’ ter take ter quar’lin’, I be a-goin’ home,” she remarked, as if this were a threat.

There was no direct reply, but the stranger looked at her with covert alarm and shame and entreaty contending in his eyes. It humiliated him to be so definitely conscious of the fact, but her presence here was a protection to him in some sort, and he leaned even upon so slight a thing as the prepossession in his favor with which he had inspired her. She did not notice, or she did not interpret, the protest in his eyes, as she and little Silas took their way through the broad open door, and into that night of moonlight and shadow. Not all of pensive mystery, not all of melancholy magic, were these ethereal elements of contrast. Some elvish spirit informed a phase with fine-spun mirth, that failed not though none was there to see; a tricky fantasy cut the leaves into grotesque shapes; with a delicate twanging note snapped a twig to test the acoustic properties of the crystalline silence; furnished the skulking fox with a nimble and crafty double to pursue him, at which he glanced over his shoulder askance; sprang up behind Mrs. Sanders and little Silas, following them in their own likeness to see them home through the woods, — the silhouette of her long, gaunt figure, with its grotesque sun-bonnet, and Silas’s small bifurcated image, with a slouched hat and a big head. The stranger did not watch them out of sight, for he became aware the next instant that Jepson had moved. The mountaineer had left the door, and was

slowly advancing upon the two as they stood at the anvil. His face was quite unmoved, placid and dispassionate in its expression, but there was something in his eye which the stranger felt it might be well to note. Jepson paused, putting one hand upon the anvil, and looking full and searchingly into the intruder's face he said, —

“What mought be yer name, stranger?”

“Rathburn, — Eugene Rathburn.”

Both mountaineers pondered upon this silently for a time.

“Ye ’lowed ye war a doctor?” said Jepson.

“Certainly I am,” replied Rathburn. “That’s how I happened to know Baintree. I attended him when he was ill in prison.”

“Waal,” — Jepson tapped the pickaxe significantly, — “ain’t this a powerful cur’ous bizness fur sech?”

“Why,” — Rathburn sought to laugh as he began to explain, — “I’m young as yet. I have no large practice. If I should find ore in quantities like the specimens Baintree shows,” — despite his fears his eyes glowed, — “I should be a wealthy man, a millionaire!”

He looked zestfully at the stolidly attentive mountaineers. They were alike incapable of sharing or understanding an enthusiasm such as this. A vague mental numbness, a sort of paralysis, began to steal over him, as he gradually realized how impossible it was to explain to them the greed for wealth, to move them to the love of riches. Yet he returned once more to the attempt: —

“Why, it would be a godsend to all this country. It would be opened out. You would all get rich, — new people in droves would come in. You would all get rich!”

The two mountaineers looked at one another.

“Thar ain’t nobody so special pore hyar, though some is better off ’n others,” observed Jepson calmly.

“You would all become educated and live high, like the ‘valley folks.’”

“Laws-a-massy, I pray ter God I ’ll never be like no val-

ley folks!" protested Clem. "Meanes' blacksmith, 'cept-in' you-uns, I ever knowed kem from Colbury. Yes, sir; Grenup war his name."

"If you could strike paying ore on that little farm of yours," — the stranger, turning to Jepson, still essayed the subject, — "you might sell it for thousands and thousands of dollars."

"I could n't sell it at all," said Jepson definitely. "My folks is all buried thar."

Rathburn looked at him with an expression which preceded a burst of astonished laughter, caught himself in time, and said no more.

"So this air what hev brung ye from home an' frien's, an' kith an' kin, ter hunt the mountings along of a murderer fur a silver mine," said Jepson sternly.

Rathburn quailed slightly, but sought to defend himself. "He is no murderer. The jury acquitted him."

"D' ye happen ter know whar's Sam'l Keale, the man he *did n't* kill, then?"

"Of course I don't," said Rathburn, visibly nettled. "I can only take the verdict of the jury on such questions. I have no right to go behind that."

"Waal, I don't need twelve men ter swear my brains inter my head," declared Jepson. "*Whar's Sam'l Keale?*"

The words rang out with the sonorous intensity of his voice. A faint echo came from the crag above the forge. The moonlight stood motionless in the door. Without, the frosty woods glittered.

"Whar's Sam'l Keale?" he cried again. "Look-a-hyar, stranger." He turned abruptly, and, with a lowered tone and a fiery eye, he laid his hand upon Rathburn's arm, who shrank under his touch. "Ye axed me whar's the mouth o' the cave whar Baintree hid him. The critter never tole! An' *I* fund Sam'l Keale's coat. An' *I* fund Sam'l Keale's hat, in a gorge they never sarched. God an' the mountings only know the hidden place, an' in thar mystery they will not reveal it."



The stranger broke forth impetuously. "Then you, *you* can tell me where that gorge is, and we can search the chasms! I feel sure that the silver is there, where the man lost his life, — the silver" —

Jepson flung away from him with a gesture so abrupt that Rathburn paused suddenly.

"What ails ye, man," cried the mountaineer, "to talk of silver in the midst o' the wharfores o' life an' death, an' a-sarchin' the gorge fur gain stiddier jestic? The place air nuthin' ter you-uns but the hope o' gittin' the riches what one man los' his life fur, an' the t'other man tuk it. What sorter critter be ye?" His eyes were blazing with reproach. "What sorter critter be ye?"

"A sane one, I hope," retorted the stranger, fairly overtaken. "I'm not intrusted with the administration of the laws. I have no right to sit in judgment on the justice of Jake Baintree's acquittal. And it won't make Samuel Keale any deader than he is — if he is dead — for me to find silver where he looked for it."

"Ye air free fur me ter find it," said Jepson, "but some time ye'll 'low the day ye los' yer soul in the gorge, an' tuk silver fur its price, war a powerful dark day, — the fore-runner o' darker ones, an' eternal gloom."

"I'm not going to lose my soul there!" cried Rathburn. "I am going to take very excellent care of my soul. I am going to strike it rich and be mighty good. Nothing in this world combines like goodness and prosperity, — natural affinities. All the good people are prosperous, and that is why they are *so* good. Adversity sours on the stomach, and deranges the nervous system, and produces crime."

Jepson's eyes rested slightly upon him.

"Ye kin persevere, fur I ain't of a mind ter hender."

Rathburn looked wistfully at him; so flinchingly was he sensible of this arrogance of permission, so did he yearn to flout and retort. Much as he had dared, he hardly dared this.

"I see no harm in sech ez ye hev said o' yer goin's on, 'ceptin' it air o' the pride an' the willfulness o' the devil; an' ef he hev a mind ter mark ye fur his own, I dunno ez I feel called on in ennywise ter stay his hand. But thar may be deceitfulness in yer words, fur I know ye war warned aforehand by a woman."

Rathburn palpably started; his eyes distended as he gazed at his self-constituted judge. How omniscient the masterful mountaineer seemed!

Jepson lingered, he hardly knew why, on this phase, despite the pain with which it was fraught. "Leastwise a gal," he continued, elaborately particularizing. "She warned ye. An' ye hev hed time ter colloque with Jake Baintree, — a skeery devil; I s'pose he war 'fraid ter kem, — an' make up lies ter tell when questioned. But ye know now ez ye air watched. Ef ye falter from the straight line, it 'll go hard with ye. Take heed ter yer feet, fur ye will find thar air men in Brumsaidge ez will medjure each pace."

He terminated the interview abruptly, making no sign of conclusion or farewell, moving with his long, deliberate, supple stride toward the door and out along the moonlit road.

Clem Sanders lingered. He felt that he would like to close his doors behind the audacity that, unlearned in the art, essayed to work at his forge, and to protect the little tongs and swage and hammer — for each of which, in the moment of its danger, he felt an almost paternal solicitude — from all non-professional intermeddling. He was placing them in their wonted order, according to his habit, when he suddenly noticed that the stranger had not moved. Rathburn was still standing, gazing steadfastly after Jepson's his whole attitude informed with resentment and agitation and the thirst for revenge, and his face bespeaking the passion and turmoil of his heart.

He turned with a quick gesture, as he became conscious that the blacksmith's eyes were upon him.

"What's that man's name?" he demanded.

Clem Sanders was aware that in some sort he had produced a less forceful impression than his ally; that his recent anger and taunts were easily overlooked, and his problematic opinions were held as of scant consequence. A trifle of surliness was engendered by the perception that he was thus ignored, and he mumbled rather than pronounced his coadjutor's name.

"Well, what's the reason he takes so much on himself, damn him!" cried Rathburn recklessly.

"Sorter robustious," explained Jepson's facile associate.

"*Sorter robustious!* Good Lord! Sets me free, and conditions me, as if— Don't anybody make any head against him?"

"'Tain't wuth while ter try. Folks sorter like Teck, an' sorter don't. But they foller arter him. An'," with a recurrent desire to do justice, "thar's one thing ez goes a long way with most folks: he's mighty religious."

"Religious! Oh, Lord!" exclaimed Rathburn in a fervor of amazement.

Clem began to enjoy the rôle of biographer, since so fevered an interest hung on his words.

"A plumb survigrous saint, he is. He hev got a mighty fine voice fur quirin'. When he sings, it sounds some like the mountings hed bruk out a-psalmin'."

"How many men did he have at your barn to-night?"

Clem Sanders gave him a long stare. "Ye wanter know too much. Ef I war a smart man, I'd stop hyar an' forge me an' you-uns a chain ter tie up these hyar tongues o' ourn. I hev done talked too much a'ready. Ef I hed n't, ye'd be a-danglin' powerful limp ter one o' them trees,"—nodding his head toward the great bare limbs,— "stone dead, an' the buzzards would be hevin' a high time 'mongst yer bones by ter-morrer."

It was not a pleasant picture under the blacksmith's crude touch, but its power was heightened by a sense of its abso-

lute veracity, and the very close propinquity it had to being an event instead of a possibility. Rathburn shuddered a little.

"It was you who let the secret slip, then," he said, his face flushing slightly. A hot, infrequent moisture had risen suddenly to his eyes. "That lovely, noble girl!" he faltered.

Sanders lost the final words in his eagerness to impress his theory of the clemency extended to the intruder, or it might have been tempered.

"Ye see, stranger, I hev got a tongue ez 'minds me o' a cow a-swimmin'. Ter see the critter ker-wallop round in the water ye 'd think 't war n't goin' nowhar in 'special, an' 'fore ye know it the beastis air out'n ear-shot. An' Teck air a sorter — I-dunno-what — I tell all I know when he air around; an' ef ye 'll b'lieve me, he got it outer me ez we-uns war a-kemin' down hyar, ez I hed let out the secret ter Marcelly Strobe, an' she war agin hangin'. I dunno how he guessed 't war her ez warned ye, — jes' kase nobody else knowed it. But that 's how kem ye ain't dead now, — kase Marcelly war agin it."

"Is he in love with her?"

"Yes," assented Clem, "but," with decision, "he air barkin' up the wrong tree. Ye kin put *that* in yer pipe an' smoke it."

Rathburn was silent for a few moments, while Clem clatteringly completed the orderly arrangement of the tools about the forge. Then they both stood together in the road, after the great barn-like doors were closed.

The moon hung near the meridian; the shadows had dwindled. There were wider avenues of frosty brilliance in the dense woods; the full splendor of the night was climaxing. The stars were few, however, and very faint; the wide spaces of the indefinitely blue sky were a desert, save here and there a vague scintillation that one might hardly distinguish as sidereal glinting or some elusive twin-

kle of frost in the air. Midnight, doubtless, and a cock was crowing. A muffled resonance the sound had, intimating that the fowl was housed in lieu of camping out among the althea bushes, — in imminent danger of fox and mink, — according to the recent summertide wont of the mountain poultry. A faint blare of a horn from the dense coverts of the distance, and an elfin shout of hilarity, barely discernible, betokened a coon-hunt on some far-away mountain. Then there fell again the deep silence of the windless night. When it was suddenly broken by a sharp sound, the interruption smote with a jar the senses, lulled and quiescent in the muteness of the resting nature. As Rathburn lifted his head, he discriminated the tones of raucous disputatious voices rising vehemently, and anon sinking down. There was an unconscious inquiry, perchance, in his eyes as he turned them upon Clem Sanders, who replied with a guttural chuckle, "Them boys at the barn a-quar'lin' with Teck."

A renewed anxiety beset Rathburn.

"You reckon they won't agree with him?"

"They never do, sca'cely. Teck's all one ter hisse'f. But they don't do nuthin' agin his say-so. Dunno why, but they don't. He be so durned robustious."

The blacksmith presently quickened his pace. Then with a drawling "Good-by" he began to run lightly along the hard, whitened road, feeling an accession of interest in what might be going forward at the barn, his curiosity concerning his companion flagging in this new prospect of excitement. His footfalls sounded, regular and rhythmic as machinery, long after he had disappeared amongst the white frosted wands of the bare brambles and the silver-tipped leaves of the luxuriant laurel.

Rathburn, thus summarily deserted, stood still for a moment, then took his way alone. He had a certain pride in the fact that even under these circumstances he could keep his steps deliberate and even. He scrutinized his gait

to assure himself on this point. Albeit policy had prompted his course and the event had so far justified its wisdom, he was well aware of the abundant resources of courage that had made it possible. Still he listened with sharpened sense, with every nerve tense, with an insidious chill stealing upon him, and he felt a rage of humiliation that he should be subjected to an anguish of fear like this, which but for its physical testimony he would not acknowledge to himself. If the voices rose or fell, he heard them only in the midst of the beat of his own footsteps, for he would not pause. Sometimes he fancied that another tramp was on the air, other footfalls — hasty, deranged, pursuing footfalls — were hard upon his track. He walked on deliberately, however that curious icy thrill crept along his nerves, and now desisted, and now renewed its chilling quiver.

He had not hitherto, in his comings and goings, been insensible of the majesty of these dark ranges, the pervasive effects of awe and silence of this nocturnal scene, — never so august, never so austere, as on this night of mingled lustre and gloom; but now a sort of repulsion for the inanimate mountain forms possessed him. He experienced that strong hatred of place, a thousand times more potent than the vaunted local attachments. He would fain have never seen these grim encircling heights; if he might, he would have swept them away into vague annihilation. There rose in his heart a sentiment, too, of reproach to the insensate scene, grown so familiar; and then he saw it, purple or duskily brown, with heavy shadows lined about with mystic strokes of luminous white and with that pure pale sky above, — saw it all through a shimmer, for the hot tears had risen to his eyes, smitten out by his helpless rage. This shabby ordeal, as he felt it, — how little he had deserved it! Even these ignorant savages could find no flaw in aught that he had done, albeit they had thirsted for his blood. They were bereft of pretext by the integrity of his intentions. Such interest, such sense of adventure, as the

secret nocturnal expeditions to the forge had possessed had given way utterly before this exigent necessity to account for his freak. He began to appreciate more definitely than before the danger that had waited upon it. And yet, he thought, what sane being would not have ventured upon a trifle of mystery rather than alienate a man who held a secret like Jake Baintree's, now half revealed, and again with a miserly clutch concealed? Always Baintree's clumsy subterfuges grew clumsier; always his reticent, suspicious nature was relaxing more and more. It seemed only a little waiting yet, and still a little time. And if these clods of mountaineers could not comprehend the value of even the remote possibility of veins of ore commensurate in richness with the specimen in Baintree's possession, Eugene Rathburn congratulated himself that he could, and felt anew that he stood ready to risk much — very much of bodily harm and mental indignity and anguish of fright — for the bare hope to live to possess the treasure. With this, he felt he was soothsayer enough to read his future, — the long lapse of years filled with the satisfied cravings his heart held dear; without it, he could scarce foresee the dull to-morrow that should follow to-day, and of which naught save sequence might be predicted, — the empty, empty time! He had a sudden spasm of an unnamed affection, very well defined, however, the reverse of nostalgia, as there arose the poignant recollection of his office in Glaston, where he sat idle much of the time, in company with a fly, that droned on the window-pane, and whence he was summoned at inconceivably long intervals to attend some charity patient. The reward of this exertion was a local reputation of having intentionally assisted the demise of certain well-known indigent worthies; the popular, logical surmise concerning his motive for the commission of the deed being that he thought "pore folks" cumberers of the ground. Science, although furnishing many rich and varied instances of transformation, fails to give data concerning

the gradual development of the professional man, — artist, author, physician, lawyer, — from the waiting, eager grub ; what causes assist at the metamorphosis, what influences favor it, what casualties retard it, what circumstances preclude it utterly. Time seems no factor, and the poor worm, with no instinct of forecast, must writhe indefinitely, not knowing whether his sinuous carcass contains the possibilities of splendid wings, or merely continued wriggles. Rathburn had turned his eyes far afield ; he yearned for the great cities that he had known as a medical student, and their ampler opportunities. He thought that he longed for wealth as a stepping-stone to the worthy practice of his chosen profession, rather than his profession as a stepping-stone to wealth. He was eager to forsake this state of elaborately equipped idleness, this farce of postulance, this endless waiting, with no certain result in view. But consciously or unconsciously, most of all he thirsted for riches ; it fired his blood to think of the avaricious grasp of the great rocky gorges. He dreamed by day as well as by night ; and sometimes, so little was there that he would not risk, that he would not do for his cherished hope, he dreamed that it might be well to lay his strong hands on Jake Baintree's neck — that had escaped such catastrophe so closely — and tighten their grasp, till the secret that the foolish, suspicious, obstructive, ignorant marplot so jealously guarded should be choked out or remain with him, hopeless, inert, and indeed incapable of telling his tale if he would. But as yet Rathburn dreamed this chiefly by night.



## XVIII.

HE had left the road mechanically where it was intersected by the turn-row that led through Eli Strobe's corn-field. All frosted and melancholy and spectral were the gaunt stalks in the moonlight. He could see the sky and the summit of a distant mountain through the meshes that the intertwined bare boughs of the orchard wrought against the horizon. But the house on the further side of the fruit trees was still invisible, embowered amongst the red and yellow sumach and dogwood foliage, that seemed to find a prolongation of life in its genial vicinage. He stopped twice, peering eagerly into its bosky surroundings; he was surprised to gauge the disappointment he experienced that there was no glimmer of light. It seemed that no one had awaited his return from the forge; it had been accounted, perhaps, hardly worth the while, since none knew that danger menaced him there, none except Marcella. He would go back, then, to his lurking coadjutor, hidden in the mountains. He could come again, and then he could thank her once more; he could never thank her enough. As he turned, his heart leaped; a tiny red gleam came through the leaves, and as he took his way back toward the gate with a quick step he saw in the moonlight a slight figure, that he had learned to know, coming down from the porch toward it.

Marcella distinguished him in the shadows as readily. She hesitated for a moment, but by the time he had reached the gate she had turned back, and she stood upon the porch as he came up the steps. The light streamed out from the open door, and fell upon his face. She saw his eyes, at

once eager and soft and almost suffused, shining upon her as he held out his hand to her.

She held out her own, but it was not a responsive gesture.

"Gimme that thar pick," she remarked stiffly. "I'll set it in the shed-room. We-uns don't tote tools in the house."

Her staid manner seemed only an added charm in his eyes, whose glance she would not meet as she took the implement in question and bore it away. For he had only sought to thus silently reiterate his thanks, since Mrs. Strobe and the master of the house were both summoned to the door by Marcella's words.

"Kem in, stranger!" cried Mrs. Strobe. "Ye war a power o' time gittin' yer pick mended. Take a cheer by the ha'th. A body would 'low 't war a powerful tejjious business, 'cordin' ter the time Marcella hev been keepin' a lookout. Ef she hev been traipsin' ter the gate wunst ter look ter see ef ye war a-kemin' back, she hev been fower hunderd an' ninety-nine times. I reckon, ef the truth war knowed, she war a-hopin' ye 'd bring Clem Sanders back with ye. Clem 's a mighty favorite 'mongst the gals."

The fire was burning blithely on the hearth, with great beds of ashes about it to attest the late hour and the waste throughout the day. The room intimated a presentiment of winter, although the batten shutters were unclosed and the door stood open. Bunches of herbs, that but lately waved in the summer's wind, were already dried and dangling from the rafters. Seeds had been gathered, and fruit dried, and red peppers strung, and gourds cut; and the tokens of this industry, marking the passing of the season, the homely harvests of the primitive housewife, all had place in the variegated pendants and festoons that swung above their heads. There was no work afoot at this time of the night. Isabel sat idle on an inverted noggin, seeming but just aroused from slumber. Mrs. Strobe perched on her chair, with her feet on its rungs and her hands

clasped in her lap, and fixed her shrewd small eyes on her visitor. It was never too late to smoke, and Eli Strobe was filling his pipe with a dried tobacco-leaf, which he crumbled for the purpose. Rathburn drew his chair aside, that he might still see Marcella, who had sunk down on a low bench by the chimney-corner; and as he responded to his host's invitation to smoke he glanced at her, the glow of the coal with which he kindled his pipe red on his face and in his eyes as her father spoke.

"Marcelly seemed ter sense ez ef suthin' mought be goin' for'ard at the forge, — some sort'n row, or suthin'," he said. "Seemed ter listen ez skeered an' white! An' fower or five times she wanted ter walk down ter the e-end o' the turn-row ter listen better." He puffed his pipe in silence for a moment. "But I told her ez 't warn't wuth while ter be oneasy. This hyar kentry, stranger," he continued impressively, "air the peaceablest c'munity on the face o' the livin' yearth. Never hev no c'motions hyar, — naw, sir; no fights nor" — He brought up short, recollecting his own reduced state and his bandaged head, which were hardly the kind of corroborative instances his statement needed. "'Thout," he qualified, "'thout it air 'lection time, an' sech ez that. Ye don't hear o' no 'sturbances in Brumsaidge, now, *do* ye?" He turned to Rathburn his haggard face, full of the pride of his charge, and reiterated, "Now, *do* ye?"

Rathburn had tilted his chair back slightly on its hind legs; he slipped the tips of his fingers in his trousers pockets; his pipe was redly aglow, and the firelight flickered over his face with its long yellow mustache and his close-clipped hair, for he did not wear his hat in the house as Eli Strobe did.

"You've been cooped up a good while, Mr. Strobe. Let me see, — how long has it been since I came over here and prescribed for you? Well, no matter; you did n't know about that, when you were first ill. Broomsedge Cove has

been having it pretty much its own way ever since then, with the constable laid up."

Strobe looked a trifle crestfallen. Marcella, with a sudden anxious impatience of manner, rose and passed to the other side of the room and mechanically closed the batten shutter, then purposelessly opened it again. Rathburn did not follow her with his eyes. They were still fixed moodily on the fire. When she seated herself again, she looked at her father with a clearing brow. A slow satisfaction, even triumph, was creeping across Eli Strobe's face. "They need me ter keep 'em straight," he observed. "Some powerful fractious boys in Brumsaidge Cove," he declared, with a slow, sidelong, convincing glance at Rathburn.

"I should think so, indeed," Rathburn affirmed, with an accession of significant emphasis. He hesitated a moment, then went on. "I fell in to-night with the ringleader of a gang of lynchers, and if I had n't been warned beforehand and known just how to talk to him I should n't have got off with my life." He once more cast a swift glance at Marcella, charged with much that he would fain have said; but her eyes were downcast, the long lashes almost touching the rare rose a-bloom in her cheeks.

Eli Strobe turned his bovine stare of slowly kindling excitement upon the speaker; his pipe-stem was quivering in his hand; his lips had parted, as if an ejaculation were trembling upon them, but the alert maternal comments forestalled him:—

"Dell-law! the crazy buzzards! What hed *ye* been a-doin' of, though, ter hev sech a pursuit ez that take arter ye?" Mrs. Strobe fixed an investigating eye upon the stranger which intimated a cautious reserve of judgment.

"I'd like for you to guess; but you never could," said Rathburn.

"It air in rank vi'lotion o' the law, no matter what he done nor what he done it fur," Eli Strobe declared impressively. Then he tremulously replaced his pipe in his mouth,

"You see," said Rathburn, leaning forward and tapping the burly mountaineer on the knee, looking up at him the while with eyes that grew fiery revealing the angry, smarting wounds to his pride, "I admit I was fool enough to agree to Jake Baintree's idiocy in keeping the matter secret. I have been trying to strike silver that he found here a few years ago, and when we broke our tools I undertook to mend and sharpen them at the forge, being a sort of Jack-of-all-trades; and I did it at night and in secret to humor him. I wanted to keep him as communicative as I could, because the fool puts me off and deceives me from day to day about the place,—the Lord knows why." He paused. "I'd like to throttle him,—I'd like to break his neck," he said, as his preoccupied gaze dwelt on the fire for a moment. Then flinging himself back in his chair in his former attitude, and slipping his hands into his pockets he continued, "That's what like to have happened to me, though, I tell you. It was a mighty close call. I got off by the skin of my teeth."

"Whar 's Jake, then?" Eli Strobe turned his bandaged head actively in search of the supposed sharer of Rathburn's peril, as if thinking him near at hand. "Some o' them boys air been keen ter see Jake stretch hemp ever sence the jury acquitted him,—miser'ble, senseless critters; got no mo' 'spect fur the law 'n so many painters an' sech. Whar 's Jake? They did n't ketch Jake, did they?" He rose stumblingly to his feet.

Rathburn laughed; the gleam of his white teeth, showing under his yellow mustache, was capable of adding a geniality to his ordinary expression, but now it gave only a certain fierceness to his face, so little mirth did it imply.

"No, you may bet your immortal soul they did n't. By this time he's mighty safe; no more to be found, I'll warrant, than Samuel Keale,—ain't that his name? I reasoned with Baintree. I begged him to come boldly out with me; we could afford to stand the scrutiny of the vigi-

lantes; but he would n't. He's afraid of your good, law-abiding population of Broomsedge, Mr. Strobe." He clasped his hands behind his head and tilted himself back in his chair, as his eyes retrospectively rested on the coals. "Jake threw down his pickaxe and started the instant we got a word of warning."

"Waal, ye war powerful lucky. Ginerally, in Brumsaidge, the lynchers an' sech keep too close a mouth fur enny words o' warnin' ter git a-goin'," said Eli Strobe, who, however he might congratulate himself in the interests of law and humanity upon the result, felt a certain deprecation of the futility of the enterprise as a work of art, as it were. "I dunno how in this worl' sech ez a word o' warnin' could hev kem ter ye."

"It may have come through a woman, but it seemed to me through an angel of mercy!" the young man declared, his glowing brown eyes swiftly seeking Marcella's flushed and grave and half-averted face.

Mrs. Strobe, unnoting the demonstration, gave a sharp little satiric laugh, more like the fleering squawk of a jay-bird than any merely human flout.

"Dell-law, stranger, don't ye b'lieve the haffen o' that. 'Twar n't no n'angel o' mercy! I ain't 'quainted with n'angels much myself, but I know enough 'bout 'em ter make mighty sure ez n'angels don't go lopin' 'round the Big Smoky seein' arter the welfare o' two sech good-lookin' young men ez ye an' Jake Baintree. It don't need no wisdom from above ter know it air mighty safe ter trest ye ter some young yearthly woman, 'thout interruptin' enny n'angel in her reg'lar business o' quirin' 'roun' the throne o' grace. Don't ye never make no sech mistake ez that." And once more it might be doubted whether it were the satiric old woman or some gay cynic of a bird that gave a short shriek of laughter.

As a general rule, Rathburn cared little what these humble, illiterate mountaineers said or how they esteemed him.

But despite his appreciation of its infinitesimal consequence he was at once surprised, and a trifle offended by the ridicule. He had turned to retort, when he saw Marcella's face with the reflection of his own sentiment upon it. Those crystal-clear eyes of hers were widely opened; he noted the upward sweep of the thick, fine lashes; and why, since her flush was so infrequent, why did it wear that exquisite hue, deepening in the cheek, and merging by indistinguishable degrees, like the fine sorceries of sunset, into the warm whiteness of her brow, and chin, and throat? Her lips were more deeply red still, — did ever a sculptor chisel a mouth like that, where all sweet graces curved sedately? It trembled slightly, and the sight of the quiver roused in him a new lease of gratitude for her timely word; even now he could not measure the risk she ran in saying it. He would not be laughed from his loyalty to the messenger who had brought him safety, even rescued his life, perhaps.

"*May* have been a woman," he admitted; she *looked* like an angel."

"A triflin' chit, I'll be bound," Mrs. Strobe declared. "Hain't she got no better work ter do 'n ter keep her eye on the young men, an' her ear open ter all the talk 'bout'n 'em?"

She spoke all unaware that the belittled "n'angel" was one of her own fireside, or that any words of hers were serving to deepen the flush on Marcella's cheek.

So preoccupied had Rathburn been hitherto in the significant and absorbing events of the evening that his mind had had little tendency to even unconscious processes of deduction which did not immediately pertain to the imminence of his danger and the security of his escape. It had not as yet occurred to him to speculate upon the influences which had moved Marcella to so unprecedented a course as to lure away the secret from one of the lynchers, and come with it to the rescue of a stranger and the ostracized Baintree. Mrs. Strobe's logic, all unwitting though she was to whom

she applied it, had kindled an idea in his brain that glowed and burned, and presently leaped like wild-fire from conjecture to conclusion, carrying all before it in its irresistible exhilaration. He was not a stranger to Marcella. She had not forgotten him, evidently. Perchance it was some nearer, more coercive, more personal interest that had nerved her; how else, indeed, could it be? He had not hitherto thought of her save that her beauty had impressed him as strangely incongruous with the poverty of her surroundings, — incompetent even to afford the foil to the jewel, and of jarring and discordant effect; and earlier to-night his heart had only been stirred toward her with genuine gratitude. It was moved now with the sweet vanity of believing himself beloved. He perhaps would have esteemed his state of mind coxcombical in another man, but poor human nature is provided with a keen vision for the defects of others, and a purblind perception of those same traits closer at home. He felt a strong zest, a renewing interest, in reviewing the circumstances, when Mrs. Strobe, drawing from her pocket a corn-cob pipe, proceeded to crumble into its bowl a leaf of tobacco, asking the while, “An’ whar did this n’angel find ye?”

Once more he glanced at Marcella, who sat quite still, quite grave, listening sedately.

“She started up the mountain, thinking she would go to Baintree’s people, and that may be they would know where he was; but she heard the picks as we were digging in a gorge, and so she found us.”

Mrs. Strobe seemed to revolve this statement when it was finished, nodded her head several times, and emitted two or three deliberate puffs of smoke. “She did, did she?” she observed, in default of more acrid comment, but bent upon ridicule.

“Then she told us all she knew” —

“Mighty easy done, I’ll bet,” interpolated the little dame.

— “Or had heard about the affair, and begged us not to tell who told us” —



"Tuk a power o' pains ter keep herself safe from the lynchers, I'll be bound" —

"That she did n't!" cried the young fellow. "That's all she said about it, and left the rest to our discretion."

"Waal, *that* war a pore dependence, I will gin up," said Mrs. Strobe, her pipe in her hand, her puckered lips, with a laugh well hid in their corrugations, ostensibly grave.

The color surged to the young man's face. He was realizing how few friends one has in the world; how alone, how piteously solitary, amongst the multitudes of one's kind. He felt that Mrs. Strobe and her son, and all Broomsedge besides, — microcosmic illustration, — would have cared little had the event resulted differently. One would have blustered a trifle about the outraged dignity of the law. The other would have said some primitively witty things, hardly decent of one so recently dead, and, hampered by her sense of decorum, would have thought still more witty things, which she would reluctantly have refrained from saying. In Glaston and Colbury his most lenient obituary would have been, "Poor fool!" And his memory would have served as a tradition in the mountains to warn the next addle-pate that came prying into their hidden chambers, seeking silver and gold and worldly treasures! Only this girl would have risked aught to save his life. Only this girl truly cared that his life was saved. She seemed at the moment the only friend he had in the world, — surely, surely the best! That better nature of his, in its facile oscillations, was reasserted anew. He forgot the flattering personal tribute which he had been disposed to arrogate to himself. He did not speculate about her interest in him. He began to entertain a more definite intention as he talked. There was something — it had almost been forgotten — that he must let her know.

"Mebbe," Mrs. Strobe resumed, the pause not being conducive to entertainment, — "mebbe the gal, or the n'angel, 'lowed ez ye hed been doin' suthin' a heap wuss, though not

so foolish, ez sarch the mountings fur silver. From the way ye an' Jake Baintree talked the night ye kem hyar ter physic Eli, me an' Marcelly 'lowed ye mus' hev killed a man — I don't mean through physickin' him, but with a pistol or suthin' — an' war a-hidin' from jestice."

"Killed a man! Great Lord!" exclaimed Rathburn, aghast. He turned and looked at Marcella, reproach eloquent in his eyes. Had she ever thought this of him?

The girl incoherently sought to defend herself — "Leastwise, granny said — 't war granny's word" — and fell tremulously silent.

"'Peared mighty reason'ble ter me," asserted the unabashed little dame. "Mebbe that 's what the n'angel thunk too."

"If she thought it, she did n't say so," he replied slowly. "But I wanted it to seem to the lynchers as if it were by accident that I went to the forge and worked. So I came over betimes, and went from here to the blacksmith's house, and could n't find him; and his mother gave me permission to open the forge, and I told her I had worked there once or twice before."

"I'll be bound Clem war one o' the lynchers!" cried Mrs. Strobe vivaciously. "Did they swaller that tale?" she demanded abruptly.

"No they did n't," he rejoined. "Their leader knew I had been warned — and — knew who had warned me."

"Marcelly, set *down*!" exclaimed the old woman, with a sharp note of reproof. "Ef ye hed been a harnt a-pop-pin' up out'n a grave, ye could n't hev skeered me wuss with yer suddint motions!"

For the girl had started abruptly to her feet, her distended eyes fastened upon Rathburn, her face paling, her hand half outstretched, trembling violently.

"The leader!" she echoed, sinking back upon the low bench under the coercive touch of Mrs. Strobe's hand. "Who told him?"

"He did n't say, but somehow he got it out of the man who let the secret slip."

Marcella knitted her brows, and fixed her pondering eyes upon the fire; her breath was quick; the rich color had deserted her cheek. With one hand she mechanically tossed back the brown curling hair that fell heavily forward from her half-bent head, and ever and again she put back the locks with the same tremulous, unconscious gesture.

"Hed them men no masks nor nuthin'?" demanded Eli Strobe, a hand on either knee, as he leaned slightly forward; he spoke with his pipe-stem fast between his teeth.

"Faces bare as my hand," replied Rathburn, holding up the member in the light of the fire.

"Waal, sir, they be powerful brigetty an' bold!" said Eli Strobe with displeasure. "They oughter hed the grace ter kiver thar faces, knowin' ez thar actions be plumb agin the law, — conspiracy, an' riot, an' ef they hed hung ye, murder; it air agin the law."

"That's why I am telling you," said Rathburn. "They are a lawless gang, and if anything happens to me, you, as an officer of the law, are in possession of the facts, and know just how and where to lay your hand on the men, the ringleader especially. I only saw two of them; the other, the blacksmith, is a hap-hazard fellow, and does his bidding. The ringleader is the soul of the iniquity; it could n't move an inch without him."

The fire had been burning clearly; the sticks across the andirons had gradually become each an entire glowing coal, of a live vermilion tint, and half translucent, yet still retaining the shape of the hickory logs they had once been; here and there an elusive amethystine flame flickered, but the salient red and white blaze of the earlier stages was quenched, and the room was all in a dusky red shadow save for now and then a livid purple gleam. Isabel nodded as she sat on the inverted noggin; sleep seemed with her in some sort an ailment, since it so reduced her from her normal state of

conversation. It was as if a palsy had fallen upon her faculties, and her face, bereft of its wonted animation, was unfamiliar, and pathetic, and forlornly reflective. The dog of the "frequent visitor" took note even in his slumbers of the dwindling state of the fire, and, with a countenance much solemnized by sleep and preternaturally sober, came and stood before it for a time, steadfastly regarding it. Then with a loud yawn, intrusive in the silence, he stretched his elastic length, rasping his nails on the stones of the hearth, and lay down once more before it. A cock crew, a muffled alarm in the distance; no other sound from the frosty midnight without. The example of the old hound had caused Mrs. Strobe to yawn too, with that epidemic appreciation of fatigue which the demonstration usually produces. She was not sorry for this, despite her ample repositories of what she collectively termed "manners." She was in hopes Rathburn would note it, and draw the natural inference.

"He 'lowed he would n't bide all night, so he mought jes' ez well take the hint an' stir his stumps away from hyar. I never see sech a ow-el ez the man," she thought.

But Glaston and Colbury hours were later than those kept in the mountains, and although Rathburn was aware that his stay exceeded the customary limits, he had no idea of its unprecedented extent. He went on after a momentary pause:—

"He is a very dangerous customer. The eye of the law could n't be better employed than fixed on that man. In Glaston, or Colbury, or anywhere else, they'd be awfully pleased to get up any kind of a charge against such a domineering blusterer as that, which would lock him up somewhere, safe out of harm's way."

He nodded his head once or twice in emphatic confirmation of the burden of his thoughts. He felt suddenly as if civilization, the world, all the mechanism of law and art and knowledge that he seemed to have been familiarized

with in some previous state of existence on some alien planet, were not so far away, after all, save in sentiment. What could be easier than to place the headstrong despot of Broomsedge Cove under the surveillance of a law stronger even than that which he wielded with so arrogant and absolute a temper? He was not so far from the county authorities, who might take more cognizance of such matters than the constable of Broomsedge Cove; as lynch-law and the domination of a community according to the will of regulators might to them perchance be less familiar. The recollection, ignominious he felt it to be, of his fear; the terrible strain on his nerves; the mere chance that had saved his life, — this girl's word of warning and his own clever diplomacy in its use, — all were bitter still to him, and his escape held none of the sweets of triumph.

He would rejoice to be revenged: not upon Clem Sanders, who seemed, in his hap-hazard lack of logic, as irresponsible as a child — not upon the unnumbered, unindividualized, unimagined vigilantes at the barn, but upon Teck Jepson. With all the fervor of a deep, suddenly awakened hatred he longed to see him cringe and cower. He resented his lofty serenity, his calm admission of the usurpation of power, his deliberate, open avowal of his intentions and of his conditional clemency. He should like to see this doughty mountaineer face the law he had insulted. His lip curled at the thought; he stroked his mustache in the satisfaction that the mental picture afforded him. He too could follow out a scheme; he too could plot, and lie in wait, and capture. "With stronger toils, my fine fellow!"

He encountered a sudden rebuff in the sequence of the idea, — the ridicule that would attach to the revelation in Glaston that in his perfectly tame and lawful prospecting for silver he should have been hauled up before the captain of vigilantes. He felt, too, that there was a certain element of derogation in his very enterprise. Unless he should find

silver, he hardly cared that it should be known in his world that he had sought it. And yet he quivered with eagerness at the very thought of vengeance upon Teck Jepson. Fine sport, to be sure, to run down this big game of the Smoky Mountains.

"For all he is so pious!" he exclaimed with a sneer.

Eli Strobe turned a slow glance upon him.

"Who be ye a-talkin' 'bout?" he demanded quietly.

"That fellow I saw over at the forge there, — the ring-leader of the lynchers. Teck Jepson is his name."

An uncomprehended sensation, of which Rathburn nevertheless was aware, swept through the circle. He felt a vague surprise to see Marcella start up in the dusky red glow of the dwindling fire, and sink back uncertain, with a pallid, distraught face. In the puckers of Mrs. Strobe's wizened little countenance, dimly white in the gloom, his transitory glance detected a strange embarrassment and discomfort. Isabel had roused herself, and was peering at him from her lowly seat. His host's head was bent toward him, the long neck outstretched, his tangled locks and beard hanging forward, as he stared in the utmost amazement.

"Ye never seen Teck Jepson to-night at the forge, young man."

"But I did," protested Rathburn. "That was what Clem Sanders called him, — a tall, powerfully built man."

"Light-complected?" asked Strobe.

"As a girl, — and he has blue eyes, and very dark hair and beard, and is slow stepping, and solemn spoken."

Eli Strobe had thrown himself back in his chair. The deep bass rumble of his laughter sounded a trifle muffled. He was laughing to himself. "Ye never seen Teck Jepson."

A crash, and the women cried out, startled; but it was only the breaking of the logs, long delayed, and the chunks falling, some within and some beyond the andirons, were sending up streams of white flame. Rathburn turned instantly back to see the constable lying at ease in his chair,

the laughter fading from his face as he reiterated, "Ye never seen Teck Jepson."

He pulled himself forward, and leaning over laid his hand on the guest's knee; looking into Rathburn's face, he said significantly, "He's dead!"

Rathburn sat silent for a moment, as if doubting his senses, "I saw him, he spoke to me, not half an hour ago," he insisted.

"Ye never seen him." Eli Strobe shook his head, with its long, melancholy locks, slowly from side to side. "Ye never seen him. Ye seen his harnt. He hev sot out ter walk. I seen his harnt wunst, myself. He's dead!"

He sank back in his chair, while Rathburn, perplexed and uncomprehending, gazed startled at him. The white firelight had conjured all the room from out the dusky nullity that had been creeping over it. The pendent trophies from the rafters seemed to sway as the light chased the shadows through their midst. The glad scarlet of the strings of peppers asserted its tint anew, and many hanks of saffron yarn lent it contrast and company. Marcella's fair face shone out upon the background of flickering brown and fleeting gold, and the night seemed to have grown younger with this sense of movement and life and light; the nerves took less heed of the lateness of the hour. The dog turned his neck in a way that challenged dislocation, and looked about the room; then rose slowly and stiffly, taking it for granted that, with this new cheer, it was day, and now and then wagging a languid tail as he glanced around at Marcella, expecting to see her set about getting breakfast. Not once did Rathburn's absorption flag as he sat and steadfastly gazed at his host; he hardly moved an eyelash, so tense, so fixed, so strained, was his attention.

As Eli Strobe glanced up from the fire he encountered the intent inquiry in Rathburn's face.

"Ye seen his harnt," he reiterated, in reply to the look. "He's dead. I kilt Teck Jepson myself, an' I oughter know. He's dead."

A sudden swift expression crossed the stranger's face like a flash of light. Marcella saw the gleam of his teeth, white under his yellow mustache; he put up one hand and stroked it, as was his wont in excitement.

"Why, now, that's a fact!" he rejoined coolly. "I had forgotten that I had heard that."

The next moment he leaned forward, extending the other hand half closed, and with a delicate tentative gesture he laid it on the constable's wrist.

"Let me feel your pulse, Mr. Strobe," he said irrelevantly. "You are still getting better, I suppose?"

The constable silently submitted. Then pursuing the subject, he added. "They can't do nuthin' ter me fur it, though, — me bein' officer o' the law, an' Teck engaged in a onlawful act. I pulled Teck off'n his hoss-critter an' bruk his neck." He nodded his head in doughty triumph. "I war sorry some arterwards. Teck war a good man in the main."

"Well, his 'harnt' ain't a good 'harnt,'" the young man flippantly declared.

His tone jarred upon Marcella, so sensitive she was for her father's sake, so wounded in the pride she had once felt in his preëminence. The wound ceased to ache as she noticed the deep attention with which Rathburn regarded the invalid. In truth, Eli Strobe well and hearty was not half the man, in his estimation, that Eli Strobe was with this strange malady, and the contemplation of the perfection of reason could not have so enthralled and invigorated his jaded perceptions as did this forlorn folly of a mental delusion. He made no further allusion to the spectral ring-leader, although more than once he turned again and surveyed with his keen professional gaze the constable's face. In his deft choosing of a subject of discussion, he seemed to to experiment with the invalid's capacities, and Marcella was amazed to note how rationally, with what strong good sense, Eli Strobe talked, reminding her of "dad's conversa-



tion" of yore, in which she had experienced such filial pride.

At last the guest rose to go, and she listened, as she stood in the doorway, to the faint footfalls on the hard ground, growing ever fainter as the distance increased, — listened and looked out at the still and solitary night, so white with the moon and the frost in the midst of its normal gloom. So mute it was, so replete with a sense of loneliness. It seemed that not even some belated vigilante could be astir in that desert of dark mountains, and icy white glintings, and profundity of silences. The fear that could but quiver at the thought grew still after a moment, and she became conscious that her grandmother had twice spoken to her.

"Marcelly," cried the irate little dame, "what ails ye ter stan' thar in the door a-lookin' out at the moon ez big-eyed ez a ow-el, ez ef ye war bound ter watch ter see the man go? I ain't a-wonderin' at ye nuther" (sarcastically); "he makes the shortes' visits o' enny o' the fool folks ez kems ter this house. Bein' ez he air a doctor-man, nex' time he kems I be a-goin' ter ax him ef he hain't got enny lotium ez will brace up a sensible woman's back ter endure the strain o' hearin' a young fool talk fower hour at a stretch. Ye need n't stan' thar stare-gazin' the moon, I tell ye, a-thinkin' ye look so powerful pritty an' enticin', with yer eyes stretched so big an' shinin'," becoming suddenly sensible of the ethereal beauty in the girl's fair face. "Thar's lots o' wimmen in this worl' ez spends thar time lookin' pritty fur nuthin'. Fur ye mark my words, — ye can't cut out that n'angel o' a gal ez brung him the news 'bout the lynchers; he air dead in love with her, else all signs fail!"

"Oh," faltered Marcella, "I 'low ye mus' be mistaken — 't war jes' — jes' " —

"Jes' what? I reckon I know folks in love whenst I see 'em. Strange ez it may 'pear, I war wunst a fool o' that kind myself," she added, with a whimsical pucker of the lips, as she began to cover the fire with the abundant ashes, that it might last till morning.

She paused presently with a deeply reflective countenance, shown half in the glow of the fire, and half in the brilliant moonlight, falling through the open window and door. "I wonder which o' these hyar mounting gals the idjit 'lows looks like a n'angel. Mus' hev been Em'line Bolter, 'ceptin' I reckon no n'angel air ez freckled ez her, — reg'lar tur-r-key-aig; or else Ar'bella Jane Perkins, though she air some cornsider'ble red-headed. But laws-a-massy, that don't make no diff'ence. When a man sets out ter be a fool, an' fall in love, Providence in its mercy warps his judgment, an' mos' enny gal mought 'pear like a n'angel. Ye Marcelly, quit hangin' on that door, a-saggin' it off'n the henges an' a-stare-gazin the moon."

It was lower now in the sky, and showed through the fringes of the pines; its pensive light was in the girl's lustrous eyes a moment longer, and then the door was closed.

## XIX.

It was close upon dawn when Rathburn reached his destination. He could hardly have defined the time when he began to appreciate that daylight had invaded the mystic moonlit splendors. There the golden sphere still hung; out of it the fine ethereal fires were dying — paling, and growing yet more dim — above the purple Chilhowee; definiteness was gradually evolving out of the shadows; a valley was shaping its sinuous course where violet vagueness had seemed a plenitude of form and fixity before. A dull, gray, hard color never known in the fine lunar chromatics, lay upon a stretch of leafless woods. A dark, sombre green, cold and funereal, betokened the pines and the laurel groves. As the moon dulled and the day dallied, stars had suddenly bloomed out with palpitating splendor. One of a white glister shone above the rugged eastern crags, and was the herald of the dawn. He was feeling the strength of the matutinal resurrection in his veins, in his lungs, expanding to its fine, keen freshness. He hardly realized that he had been awake all night, after a long day's tramp with his pick through the rugged gorges of the mountains. He had long since ceased to glance apprehensively to the right and left, lest there might be still an avenger lurking upon his track, as he took his way along the herder's trail through the savage wilderness. Confidence came renewed with renewed freedom. He stopped to see, through a gap in the mountain, all along the summits of the misty purple ranges, a line of vermilion rise, expanding into the broad spaces of the pale sky, for the living sun was in the vital air. He hears an eagle cry, the sound infinitely wild and

joyous with a savage enthusiasm in life ; the splendid sweep of the great bird's wings describe long curves in the light air, and the yellow glow slants so far, so far ! A warm day, — for where is the frost ? That fine vaporous tissue, all that there is to show for those premonitions of winter in the vanished white rime ! All going down and down to Hang-Over Mountain, to lurk about the cold currents of the Little Tennessee.

There was moisture on the full yellow leaves of the hickory, the splendid red foliage of the scarlet oak and the sourwood, shaken out afresh as bravely as if summer burned still in the sap ; there were ferns green yet, here and there. He stooped to pick a spray of the lilac "Christmas flower," and thrust it jauntily in the button-hole of his blue flannel shirt ; then, as his path curved abruptly, he came within sight of the deserted cabin which he and Baintree had lately made their camp.

Somehow, with its dark little roof beneath that vast sky, so splendidly aflare, the gigantic vigorous trees on every hand, the gallant wind a-blarneying all its bugles down the ravines, the sense of great openness and infinite space, it seemed doubly mean, and the plots devised there curiously sordid, and the episode and escape of last night grotesquely ignominious. In the midst of the conscious physical luxury that every respiration of the high air afforded, he wished he had never seen the place ; his cherished scheme, for which he had risked so much, palled for the nonce. He became aware of a great infusion of bitterness toward Jake Baintree, that was not less strong because of contempt.

"And where has he gone, I wonder ?" he said, as he approached the cabin.

For there was no smoke from the chimney and the place was silent. He checked his pace as he went toward the door. The unhewn logs that had once formed the steps to ascend to the threshold had rotted down at one side ; the wood quaked and gave way anew under his tread, as he laid

his hand on the latch. It was not fastened, and the door easily swung back under his touch.

The room was vacant, illumined less by the rifts in the broken batten shutter than by the pale stream of light that came down the chimney, for the embers had died on the hearth. A repugnance, a paroxysm of fastidiousness, seized him as he looked in at the desolate discomforts, the sordid bareness, of the place.

"This is no way to live!" he exclaimed, forgetful for the moment of the wealth that barely eluded his clutching hand; and as he remembered it he thought it would be hardly earned. He had not cared heretofore for the deprivations which he had endured although he had found scant congeniality in his comrade. The suspicion of crime, however, which attached to Baintree had seemed but the touch of romance to the backwoods desperado. But Jake had proved himself little fitted for that stanch rôle; and however natural his flight when he heard of the danger, Rathburn had not the dispassionate temperament to regard it leniently. He felt that it savored strongly of cowardice, he mentally designated his comrade a "contemptible cur," and he began to feel a certain absorbing curiosity concerning the whereabouts of Samuel Keale and how he had met his fate.

When he had kindled a fire and sat down before it, clasping his hands behind his head, waiting for the coals that he might prepare the primitive meal, which in his rough experience he had learned to cook, he entered upon a continuous expectation of Baintree's return. This grew to an irritable suspense. More than once he rose, walked to the door, and stood looking over the vast landscape and scanning the little path that their feet had worn to the spring, with the vivid intimation that in another instant he should see the tall, thin figure, the cadaverous face, the sleek black hair, emerge from the clustering laurel. But except for a rabbit, leaping along, and pausing to feed itself upon a succulent green

leaf, held very humanly between its fore-paws, — except for this wayfarer, and the slow paces of the sunlight loitering on to noon, naught came and naught went. Sometimes when Rathburn returned to the fire he examined anew the specimens which together they had found, — all strangely inferior, strangely meagre, in contrast to the rich bits of “float” which Baintree had showed him in the prison, and with which he had lured him on from day to day.

“He never found this beside that torrent in the gorge, — he may swear till he is blue!” Rathburn looked at the bit of rock, shook his head, and replaced it on the rude shelf that served as mantelpiece. And once more he went to the door.

There should be no more delays, no more tortuous lies, with which he had borne merely seeking to humor the ignorant mountaineer, to familiarize him with the idea of a coadjutor, to wear out the constitutional distrust of the man. He would wait no longer; let him lay hands again on Jake Baintree, — he unconsciously clenched them, — and he would have out of him the secret he so foolishly, so zealously, guarded. And yet he thought that daily Baintree intended to reveal it; and when they would set forth to find the spot, the mountaineer would first become preoccupied, then silent, and presently stop short and pretend in clumsy fiction to recognize landmarks, and both would go through a fruitless feint of digging to find mineral that both knew was still far to seek.

“There has been enough of it!” Rathburn declared between his set teeth, in his reverie.

The prospect had all apparently seemed equitable to Baintree. He had rejoiced at the idea of securing an expert in some sort as a partner; he had voluntarily offered to divide. Perhaps the inchoate wealth of his secret had become more precious to him; perhaps he merely doubted the good faith of his partner. But the summer months had gone, and autumn was waning. “And it’s time there

was an end of it," Rathburn said, still looking out of the door.

Exhaustion prevailed at last and overpowered vigilance. He had lain down upon the floor, pillowing his head on a saddle that had been flung there, intending merely to rest; but he was soon asleep, and the sun swung vertically above the Great Smoky, and gradually took its way down the steep western slopes, and presently the light faded from the purple earth, and the stars were in the great altitudes of the sky, alternating with vast spaces of gloom, for the night had brought clouds, and the moonrise was impenetrably veiled. Still he slept, unheeding that the fire had died to an ember on the hearth, unheeding that the wind howled in the gorge. The door shook in its rude grasp; the roof creaked; sharp draughts came through the crannies, and scattered the dry ashes about the floor. Suddenly there was a sound outside other than the swirl of the dead leaves about the rotting threshold. A stealthy step came to the window. A face peered in through the rifts of the batten shutter.

Rathburn might have seen it, for the embers sent up at that moment a fitful blue gleam which played over the room, showing its dishevelment and his own recumbent figure, with its yellow head on the old dark saddle, and showing as well the face that looked in, — but he was too deep, far too deep, in his dream.

The tiny flame dropped; the red ember glowed; the room was lighter than the black wilds without, and perhaps the recumbent figure beside the hearth was still visible to the peering eyes, themselves now invisible from within. The subtle influence of their long, steadfast scrutiny shook even the deep securities of slumber. It pervaded Rathburn's consciousness, — how, with all his science he might hardly have explained. He shifted his attitude once or twice; then with a great start he struggled up to his feet.

For a moment the stupefying pain of a sudden awakening possessed his torpid consciousness. The next, he heard

the wind trumpeting a blast that he had learned to know, and he reluctantly realized his surroundings. Once more he felt the chill of those scrutinizing eyes upon him, — a vague uneasiness which he could not recognize. His long-drawn sigh of somnolent reaction was checked midway. He stooped to the fire, and vainly sought to coax the embers to kindle anew. The sound of his own voice in an impatient exclamation had a strange echo in the empty loneliness of the place. He had matches in his pockets, or, like the provident mountaineers, he would not have suffered the fire to die. It was only a moment or two before the long, ribbon-like unfurlings of the white flames of pine knots were flying up the chimney, and there was no face at the window, and no sound but the riotous play of the wind without.

He had taken a chair before the fire when his alert ear discriminated in the elemental stir a step that deliberately approached. There was a hand upon the latch.

"Come in!" he sang out, without rousing himself, or hardly turning his head. He felt sure of the identity of the new-comer. He could measure, too, the deprecating envy and embarrassment that the contemplation of his serenity and bravado would excite in the wary and timorously suspicious Baintree, and he was in the mood to-night when that display of manly superiority was a grateful solace to his feelings and pride, so seriously jarred by the events of last evening. He did not look up until Baintree was drawing the other rickety chair to the fire, turning toward him an eager, inquiring face, every muscle of which expressed surprise, suspicion; and an earnest plea to disarm criticism.

"Howdy do, Jake," observed Rathburn, enjoying his suspense. "The weather is getting to be 'some,' if not more, ain't it? Listen at the wind, will you."

"The wind's sorter harsh ter-night," said Baintree. He sat down quietly in his chair, taking his cue from Rath-



burn's manner and emulating his composure. Nevertheless, to the trained medical eye he was showing many symptoms of overwrought nerves, of long, harassing anxiety; he had doubtless been without food, without sleep, for many an hour.

Rathburn was conscious that in the coming interview he would derive an advantage from the long, restful slumber in which the day had passed, and which had given brain and will again into his own control. The professional conscience, however, stirred at the sight of physical need.

"Get you something to eat, Jake," he said with his professional manner. "You want it. Must be something on the shelf."

But Baintree, rubbing together his long, thin hands, a trifle chilled, for the temperature without had changed, declared that he was not hungry.

"All right," returned the doctor, lightly. "I can lead a horse to water, but I can't make him drink."

The last word seemed to remind Baintree that there was a bottle on the shelf as well as food. He got up with his alert, soft step, took a long pull at it, and came back to his comrade with its effects distinctly apparent in the aroma upon his breath and the confidence which it served to impart to his manner. He pushed his hat far back on his sleek black head, rubbed his face once or twice between his hands, and then, leaning his elbows on his knees, he spread out his thin, almost transparent fingers over the blaze. He looked craftily up, presently, at Rathburn, who sat gazing placidly into the fire, one hand stroking his long yellow mustache. Few people could have augured from his easy composure and his debonair grace that he had lately been in danger of his life at the hands of a mob, or that he owed his security to aught that he could plan or compass.

"Marcelly Strobe mus' hev been foolin' we-uns some. Funnin', I s'pose," Baintree hazarded.

"She told the truth, as she always does, I am sure."

Baintree's outspread hands quivered despite the fictitious courage imparted by apple-jack. His eyes dilated.

"War — war thar ennybody thar sure enough?"

"Plenty of 'em. But only two came to the forge."

"What — what did they say?"

"Oh, they were civil enough," returned Rathburn in an offhand fashion.

"How did you git away from 'em?"

"Oh, I had no trouble. I did just as I told you I should: went to the blacksmith's house and roused up his mother, and pretended to be hunting for him."

"Did that tale go down?" asked Baintree, his relish of deceiving the enemy even by proxy causing his eyes to glitter.

"Not a bit of it. That devil Teck Jepson had got wind of our being warned, and of who warned us. He just felt sort o' good, I suppose, and let me off."

"He would n't ef I had been thar," said Baintree with a pessimistic nod of the head.

"He would!"

Baintree did not retaliate with a counter-retort. He was silent for a moment. Then he observed, "Teck an' Marcelly useter keep comp'ny tergether. I'll bet she got skeered arter she warned us, an' let him know she hed gin us the word."

"She ain't one of that kind. She don't scare worth a cent. She's worth any ten men!"

There was something so fervent in his tone that it seemed to give a new and unique direction to Jake Baintree's thoughts.

Presently he said, "She air a powerful good an' pritty gal, Marcelly air! But she ain't in no wise like them young town gals in Glaston. I useter see 'em on the street whenst I war fetched from the jail ter the court. Them 's the sort ye been 'quainted with, — the kind that walks with par'sols. She ain't in no wise like them fine town gals."

“And what if she ain’t? She ’s better than them all put together, and a thousand times prettier.”

It was hardly twenty-four hours since she had bestirred herself to save his life, and his heart was still warm toward her.

## XX.

BAINTREE lifted his sleek black head for a moment, and covertly surveyed his fireside companion, whose eyes were fixed meditatively on the coals. There was an expression of acute though surprised comprehension in the face of the crafty mountaineer; his elevated eyebrows, keen, quick glance, and thin pursed lips betokened much deft and agile deduction and analysis, although none of these swift processes were indicated in the reflective mien into which he had relapsed before Rathburn's attention once more reverted to him.

"Marcelly air pritty enough," he said, still spreading his thin fingers to the blaze. "Thar ain't no two ways 'bout'n that. I reckon a man mought take a righteous oath ez thar ain't sech another lookin' gal in the Newnited States — but she ain't like them young citified Glaston gals, what walks with par'sols, — in no wise like them ez walks with par'sols," he repeated the phrase with relish of its aptness, for to him it expressed the totality of the status. "An' she don't know none of the things they know. Why shucks! even the men-folks in the mountings air a thousand million o' miles away behind the times. I fund that out through jes' goin' ter jail in a sure-enough town. I reckon they would fall down stunned ef they war ter see a three-story house. I'll be bound they would be plumb afeard ter go inside o' one, thinkin' bein' so high it mought fall in onto 'em an' mash 'em tee-to-tally!" He looked up half laughing, half sneering at the thought of his compatriots' ignorance, and Rathburn's face wore a responsive gleam, — Jake Baintree's attitude of superiority expressed so definitely how relative a thing is sophistication!

"The folks in the mountings don't know nuthin' sca'cely," he went on, evidently bitten by that tarantula of decrying the home-keeping things which besets more learned travelers in wider circuits. "But they won't b'lieve that, though. Why, even me — I useter think thar war n't no kentry but Tennessee, an' No'th Carliny, an' Georgy, an' sech. It liked ter hev knocked me down whenst that man ez war my cell-mate in Glaston — ye 'member, he hed a chronic mis'ry in his throat — an' bless the Lord, he showed me Ashy an' Africky an' Europe on a map he hed, an' I could n't sleep none that night — the news liked ter hev tuk my breath away!"

He reached behind the chair to the woodpile, lifted a great log split in half, and flung it on the fire, which sent up a myriad of sparks and a cloud of smoke, and then seemed to dwindle in discouragement for a season, only now and then emitting a timorous blue or yellow flame to coil like a thong around the bulk of the wood, disappearing the next moment in the slowly ascending gray wreaths that had usurped the place of the dancing blazes. The room had grown very nearly dark. Rathburn could ill distinguish the crouching figure, with its elbows on its knees, seated in the rickety chair on the opposite side of the hearth. It seemed lighter without than within. He could see through the rift in the batten shutter a section of the deeply purple sky athwart which the leafless twigs of a bough near at hand moved fitfully, fretted by the wind. Once in their midst a great white star shone, pulsating in some splendid ecstasy, and then the clouds surged over it anew. The lash-like blaze sprang out once more about the log, and he caught Baintree's eye, still illumined with a jeering laugh, and a twinkling appreciation of the incongruity between his present fully-posted estate and his former ignorance.

"Did ye see Eli?" he demanded presently.

Rathburn nodded.

"Hev he got sensible agin?" asked Baintree, remember-

ing the constable's delirious condition when they visited the house together.

"He talked very sensibly indeed, this evening," the physician replied evasively, the professional punctilio instantly on the alert, "especially about lynchers and law-breakers generally — sound views."

Baintree became suddenly rigid.

"Ye war n't fool enough," he said, sitting stiffly upright, "ter go tellin' Eli Strobe, the off'cer o' the law, 'bout'n them men *by name* — they 'd hang ye fur a informer, ef they hed nuthin' else agin ye, ef enny of 'em fund it out."

"*That* for their slip-knots!" cried Rathburn, snapping his fingers and laughing in gay bravado. "I'm not in collusion with 'em, an' I'll do nothing to protect 'em. I'll give 'em away every time!"

Baintree visibly winced at the mere idea of this defiance. He made no response for a moment, but looked doubtfully over his shoulder at the broken batten shutter. It shivered and shook as if in sympathy with his glance.

"The wind is harsh ter-night," he said again.

"I'm through with this skulking and hiding," said Rathburn, the superficial composure and friendly tone that he had maintained giving way suddenly. "I'll say what I mean, and what I think, and what I feel. And I'm going to hire twenty — fifty hands — to sink shafts in both those gorges where the best indications are."

Baintree had been startled by his sudden change of tone, and had listened with relaxing muscles and lips parted. A certain hardening took possession of his features as the final words fell on the air. A covert triumph, a definite appreciation of his own cleverness, shone in his eyes, incongruously enough with the mild tenor of his speech as he said, "Waal, Eugene, I wish ye well — I wish ye well! Ye an' me hev been mighty frien'ly tergether an' I hev enjyed yer comp'ny."

Rathburn, tilted back in his chair with his hands clasped

behind his head, looked, with curling lip and sarcastic, glowing eye, the sneering protest that it was futile to speak. Since he had been so free with his company he could not logically quarrel with Baintree for presuming to find it agreeable.

"I be sorry ye hev got tired o' me. I ain't ez school-larned ez ye, though I ain't like a ignorunt mountaineer, nuther. I hev larned some in books, an' I be one o' them ez kin larn out'n 'em, too. Thar's a heap o' things I know — through jes' bein' knowin'." His look was the very essence of boastful slyness as he cast his eyes up obliquely at the flushing face of the young townsman. He had his elbows once more on his knees, and his chin in his long bony hand, and his drawl was not as distinct, thus hampered, as it might have been. "Eli Strobe hev been ter Glaston time I war tried, likewise Teck Jepson. They never larnt thar what I larned 'bout town ways; they never seen thar what I seen! Though Teck Jepson hev got sech a survigrous vision ez he kin view the prophets o' the Lord lopin' around the Big Smoky Mountings! — when the men never war out'n Ashy in all thar born days, 'ceptin' they hed a sorter stampin'-ground o' captivity in Egypt." He gave the self-flattering laugh of conscious cleverness, and then went on with that manner compounded of mock-humility and fraternal familiarity which had become so offensive to Rathburn. "But I ain't ekal ter sech ez you-uns, Eugene, an' I don't wonder none ef ye hev in an' about hed enough o' me. I don't wish ye nuthin' but well. Mebbe ye mought hire some o' them men ez war along o' Teck Jepson at the blacksmith's barn ter-night ter kem an' dig an' sink shafts." He rubbed his chin in pretended cogitation upon ways and means. "Folks in Brumsaidge ain't gin over ter diggin' much — seems ez ef it in an' about kills 'em ter hev ter scratch the top o' the ground enough with thar shallow plowin' ter put in the leetle bit o' corn an' sorghum an' sech ter keep the life in 'em. But mebbe ef ye war ter hire

'em, they would be cured o' thar dad-burned laziness, an' would jes' jump fur jye fur the pleasure o' diggin' down sixty or sebenty feet in the hard groun'. They would git used ter giant-powder an' sech, too, arter a while — an' would n't 'low the Devil war in it."

Eugene Rathburn was chewing the end of his mustache, now and then pausing with his white teeth set, and looking at Baintree with antagonistic eyes, his anger held in bounds only by the sense of being at a disadvantage, and the demoralizing effect of sustaining an unrequitable rebuff, — for Baintree's sarcasm admitted of no successful retort. It was merely for the sake of going through the motions of self-confidence and asserting independence, that he said in an off-hand way, "Oh, I meant laborers from Glaston — Irish ditchers; they are willing to dig, I fancy."

Jake Baintree affected to receive this with solemn consideration. "Yes, sir! *They'd* dig. Useter see a gang a-workin' on that thar new railroad — whilst lookin' out'n the jail winder."

It seemed a wide and varied expression of the world and of life that that jail window had given upon, so much had the crafty observation been able to glean therefrom.

"*They'd* 'stonish the mounting folks! Thar ain't no sech dirt-slingers nowhar. But 'pears like ter me, Eugene, they mought be sorter expensive — ef — ef, ye know — it war ter turn out ez thar *war n't* silver in payin' quantities. Ye know bes', Eugene, what with yer book-larnin', yer g'ology an' sech, an' yer leetle assayin' consarns, but ez fur ez I kin jedge, ye air powerful welcome ter enny min'ral in them two gorges. I'm willin' ter gin ye my sheer!" He had spoken gravely, but suddenly a glancing smile lighted up his eyes and curved his lips with so spontaneous an expression of malicious enjoyment that it seemed in his rare relish of the situation his will had lost control of his muscles. He instantly recovered himself, and although he noted the fact that Eugene Rathburn, quietly looking at him, had marked



the dropping of the mask, he went on in the same mock-fraternal vein, "I dunno ez I be hopeful 'bout'n it, Eugene — but I wish ye well, I wish ye well, Eugene."

Rathburn was holding his every muscle in a sedulous placidity. There was a conscious, intent, exacting calmness upon his face and in his voice.

"Baintree," he said slowly, "I am glad I slept to-day. I am glad I have my nerves abnormally under my control. Otherwise I should kill you, — I should strike you dead where you are. No man under ordinary circumstances could resist the temptation."

Baintree cast a searching glance upon him ; then emboldened by his quiescent aspect, he sneered as he laughed.

"Then I'm glad, too, ye slept. Thanky kindly, sir ! But I hain't slept none. An' I know ye would n't 'low ez I war right perlite ef I war ter kill ye an' take yer life, kase I hain't hed my nap. I'm glad, too ; I never s'picioned afore how much interest I oughter take in yer sleepin' sound an' satisfactory."

Rathburn felt the blood rush to his temples, and he heard his hurrying pulses beat surcharged with the impetus of rage. He did not stir. He still sat with his hands clasped behind his head, his chair tilted on the hind legs. He looked very trim, and sinewy, and lithe in his close-fitting blue flannel shirt and trousers, with the well-shaped high boots coming to the knee, in contrast with the long and lean Baintree, upon whose gaunt frame his ill-made brown jeans hung with many a crease and wrinkle. Beside the florid young physician, the jail-bird seemed to have no blood in his veins, so pallid was his clearly-cut face. As they steadfastly gazed at one another, the comparison might have interested a third party looking on in the firelight, now richly aglow once more ; but they were alone in the vastness of the Great Smoky Mountains, the slope of this lofty dome inhabited by naught else save bear, or panther, or wolf. Only the mist peered in at the rift of the batten shutter,

white-faced, and wild, and disheveled, fleeing forever before the ousting wind that made the timorous silent thing a vagrant. It seemed as if to escape the antagonistic element that it sought to enter the rift in the shutter, sending in a hesitating wreath, slow-stealing, pausing aghast in the glow of the fire, and disappearing in the instant.

As the two comrades faced each other it was hard to say which had the advantage, the clever man with the aid of culture, or the clever man so clever despite the lack of culture.

Baintree's insidious sarcasms, with their ever-ready thrust, had acquired an edge from the attrition with his malicious mirth. And Rathburn found that his seriousness weighted his anger and, since he would not sanction its outburst, made his defense clumsy.

"I don't understand you, Jake," he said at last in a mollifying tone, — "to save my life I can't understand you. You go fooling me along with a bait of rich float from month to month pretending to show me where you found it. And when I tell you that it is impossible that you could have found it here, and there, and elsewhere, because the formation proves you a liar, you make out all at once that you were mistaken, and we plod about, and you affect to recognize other landmarks, and so we have the whole tomfoolery over again. If you were half as smart as you think you are, you would realize that you can't light hap-hazard on any similar rich spot — you have got to go where you found that piece of float, and follow it up or dig there."

"Laws-a-massy, Eugene," said Baintree, adopting in turn a more pacific tone, and holding out both empty hands with the palms upward as if to express a vacuity of unworthy intention, "don't I try an' try ter find the percise spot, an' ef I fool ye don't I fool myse'f too? 'T war toler'ble long ago whenst I fund that rock, an' the Big Smoky Mountings seem sorter roomy whenst ye take ter huntin' fur one percise leetle yard medjure o' groun', whar a boy five year ago picked up a rock."

Somehow as he became less acrid the temper of the other waxed stronger, feeling the opposition lessen. With this spirit encroaching upon his self-control Rathburn said suddenly, "I don't believe one word of it. You know the spot well enough. You are afraid to go to it."

Baintree, whose attitude remained unchanged, barely having had time to shift to a defiant sneer the deprecating earnest look he had worn, seemed petrified for one moment as he sat still holding out his hands, his laugh rigid on his startled face.

"'Fraid!" he echoed, glancing over his shoulder at the spectral mists that came in at the crevice in the shutter and paused at the sight of the fire, and shivered into invisibility. "'Fraid!"

Suddenly the rain came down on the roof with a thousand tentative touches upon the clapboards, as if to try their sonorous capacities, and elicit what element of melody so unpromising an instrument might add to the music of the storm. Through its iterative staccato beat might be heard the blended, unindividualized fall of the floods in the distance, a low, mellow resonance. A chill blast came in under the door. The chimney piped. The pallid mists were torn from the rift in the shutter, and one could see upon the black and limited space of darkness without certain fine gray palpitating lines of rain, close at hand, continuously shifting, but never ceasing nor breaking into drops.

"I believe," continued Rathburn, "that the silver is at the spot where you ki — where that man Samuel Keale lost his life." He did not fail to note that Baintree winced at the name. "And you are afraid to go there, and — ignorant fool that you are! — you think because silver is there, it is anywhere else, and if we dig hard enough we will find it *somewhere* in the mountains."

Baintree said nothing. He sat moistening his thin dry lips with the tip of his tongue, and looking at Rathburn with eyes small, bright, and with an expression that re-

minded him of the eyes of a rat in a trap, timorous, furtive, and bespeaking mercy that it did not hope to receive.

"Where is that cave? Tell me that," urged Rathburn, all his eager desire for the hidden treasure goading him anew with the recollection of how long he had been forced to dally upon the verge of an opulent discovery.

"Where is that cave?" he demanded. He was fain to raise his voice to be heard above the din of the elements, and the commanding tones added to the sense of power that possessed him more and more as Baintree's confidence collapsed. "I don't ask you to tell me where the float was found — simply where is that cave?"

Still Baintree met his eye like a caged and helpless thing. He nevertheless had something in his power, — to be speechless; and as Rathburn perceived a resolution in his dumbness he persisted more vehemently.

"Tell me! Tell me! Then, if you won't, Teck Jepson will be ready enough to tell me where he found the man's coat and hat, and I suppose the cave can't be far away in the gorge. I shall find it — I shall find it — I shall never cease to search until" —

As he spoke he caught a glint of triumph in Baintree's eyes. He realized how far afield his hopes had carried him, that long and devious distances lay between the spot to which he might be guided and the spot he sought.

With a sudden savage cry and the agility of a panther he flung himself upon the man at the fireside and grappled at his throat.

"Tell me!" he ground out between his set teeth. "Tell me!"

A hoarse, half-strangled, intermittent scream for help filled the log-cabin, and penetrated to the stormy voids of the wilderness without. How vain! The heedless rain beat upon the roof. The unrecking wind passed by. They were alone in the lofty fastnesses of the mountains, and one was at the mercy of the other. Eugene Rathburn had

never thought to put his knowledge of the mechanism of the human throat to such uses, but the mountaineer's superior strength had enabled him only to rise and to writhe helplessly upon the verge of strangulation, under the scientific pressure of those fine and slender hands upon his bare throat, practically demonstrating how nearly a man may be choked and still live. For now and again their grasp relaxed, not to permit that hoarse, futile cry which twice and thrice ensued, but as the essential means of an answer to the question, —

“Tell me, where did you find it?”

Baintree, taken by surprise, his eyes starting out of his head, his face almost purple, both unnerved hands grasping Rathburn's lifted arms, seemed in these intervals, in catching his breath, to regain a modicum of his faculties. He ceased his instinctive efforts to tear away the strong clutch at his throat. He swiftly passed his arms around the waist of his assailant, and with a sudden wrench sought to fling him to the floor. But the lithe Rathburn kept his feet, and the two went staggering together across the room; crashing over the chairs; dragging the saddle that lay on the floor under their clumsy, stumbling steps, the stirrup-irons clattering on the puncheons; now swaying this way and now that; overturning the table, with its scanty store of crockery breaking unheeded on the hearthstone. The red firelight, sole witness of the strife, flickered bravely on the brown walls; the green wood, with the sap still in the fibres, sang a mellow elfin song, fine and faint, all unheard. Their shadows had lost the pacific habit of many evenings of fraternal communings when the silhouettes smoked many a pipe in Barmecidal fashion, and drank together in dumb show, and imitated their hilarious, genial, and hopeful gestures. Now, adopting their example anew, they reeled furiously after them as they went.

Baintree's vise-like grip failed when the pressure on his throat was renewed; the strength of the convulsive struggle,

in which all his unconscious physical forces were asserted, proved futile. There was a different expression in his bulging eyes — he was beginning to believe that the reply to the question was the price of his life. Perhaps Rathburn noticed and interpreted the sign of subduement. The pressure of the deft fingers relaxed again.

“Where did you find the float — tell me!” he reiterated.

“I never fund it,” Baintree gasped. The fingers tightened on his throat, then loosened, for he was about to speak again. “Sam’l Keale fund it.”

“Where — where?” demanded Rathburn, his teeth set hard and his breath fluttering.

“I dunno,” gasped the victim, — “he would n’t never tell me!”

“You killed him for that?” Rathburn asked swiftly — suddenly his fingers began to tremble. Had he too been tempted to this hideous crime through the lure of that bit of float? “What ever became of him?”

He asked this question less with the desire of response than with an instinctive effort to elude even to his own conscience the tracing of so repulsive a parallel. But Baintree could not divine his train of thought nor that aught had served to weaken that clutch upon his throat save the wish to facilitate reply. He was in momentary expectation of its renewal. He had yielded and yielded utterly.

“I never knowed,” he sputtered, — “ez the Lord air my witness I never knowed. He jes’ disappeared one day, an’ I traced his steps ter the mouth o’ a cave, — thar hed been a rain, — an’ I never seen him agin.”

“Was the cave where Jepson found his hat and coat?” Rathburn demanded.

“Naw!” exclaimed Baintree, his eyes growing suddenly intent with anger. “Naw! Ef I hed knowed at the trial ez Teck Jepson war a-goin’ ter find them old clothes in the gorge, an’ make sech a power o’ a ’miration over ’em arter ward at the baptizin’, I’d hev tole whar the cave war sure

enough whenst they put me on the stand. An' Teck Jepson would n't hev liked that so mighty well, I reckon, kase all the kentry knowed ez him an' Sam'l war at logger-heads."

"Why? — what would Jepson have cared?" cried Rathburn.

It was only because of the revived interest of the moment that his muscles grew tense, but his grasp had the intimation of coercion to Baintree, who instantly responded, with a nod of the head, —

"Kase the cave's on his land — in Teck Jepson's woods. That's why! An' folks war powerful worked up an' excited then, an' mought hev s'picioned him."

Rathburn's hands fell from Baintree's throat to his shoulders. "Jake," he said, amazed, his voice bated with uncertainty and excitement, "why did you never tell this before, if you had no hand in Keale's death?"

"What did I want ter tell fur? How'd I know what ter tell an' what not ter tell? Nobody knowed how nuthin' would strike the jury — not even the lawyer. An' I 'lowed ef they fund Sam'l thar," — he shivered a little at the suggestion, — "he'd hev looked turrible, mebbe, an' hev hed his bones bruk — an' that would hev made it all go harsher at the trial. Ev'rybody knowed he had been consortin' with me, a-sarchin' fur silver, an' war seen las' along o' me. So I jes' pertended I could n't find the spot agin, an' the steps ez led ter the cave; it hed rained mo', an' the groun' war washed up cornsider'ble. An' they all 'lowed 't war up in the gorge whar them clothes war fund. Why n't I tell, an' why n't I tell?" he reiterated. "I be sorry now I hev tole what I hev tole."

He cast his anxious eyes absently about the room with a harried, hunted look. Evidently the disclosure he had made was of paramount importance to him, and precluded for the moment consideration or realization of the coercion which had elicited it.

"That 's of no importance — you could n't be tried again for the same offense," said Rathburn reassuringly.

"Waal — *that* rule don't hold good in Jedge Lynch's court," returned Baintree gloomily.

Rathburn walked away a few steps with his hands in his pockets. It was difficult to assume a casual air after the episode of the evening, but his efforts were aided by Baintree's fixed attention upon the engrossing subject of Keale's disappearance rather than his recent injuries.

He stopped short suddenly. "Thought you and he were scuffling and playing when he fell into the chasm?" He looked at Baintree with a revival of suspicion.

"I 'lowed that whenst I war confused an' did n't know what ter say," replied Baintree. "We war n't playin' nor nuthin'. He lef' me a-diggin' in the gorge — an' lef' his hat an' coat thar — an' 'lowed he war a-goin' ter a spot ter peck at the rocks a leetle funder down; an' I waited an' waited, — I waited a week fur him, whenst I fund his track ter the cave — 'feard ter go home. He ain't kem yit."

Rathburn sank down into his chair beside the fire with a dazed, baffled sense of loss. He was trembling with excitement, and exhausted by the struggle. His eyes were fixed, unseeing, on the fire, and he panted heavily as he drew out his handkerchief and passed it over his forehead.

"Why did n't you tell me before that it was he who found the float; that you did n't know where in this big, thrice-accursed wilderness it came from?"

"Kase I war 'feard ye would n't 'low 't war wuth while ter sarch, then," responded Baintree, with the promptitude of the instinct of self-defense. "I 'lowed ef Sam'l Keale, knowin' the leetle he did 'bout min'ral, could find sech ez that, ye with *all* yer book-larnin' could. What's the good o' yer g'ology, an' all yer other gear, ef ye can't?"

"I can't find silver if it is n't in the rock," returned Rathburn. This was not said in the tone of a retort. A gnawing sense of shame, a burning self-reproach, had the ascend-



ancy in his consciousness, — even the vanishing prospects of wealth, diminishing gradually in the far perspective of probability, were secondary for the time. He could not justify his deed — he blushed for his motives. He felt in this cooler moment of reflection as if he had suffered some metamorphosis — some translation into another sordid entity, whose every impulse was followed by an anguish of remorse. He gazed down at his hands, still red and smarting with the strain to which he had subjected them, as if he could hardly endure to acknowledge them after the work which they had done for him so well and cleverly. His lids drooped a little as he looked up at Baintree, and he evasively glanced hastily away.

“Jake,” he said in an embarrassed and husky tone, — the mountaineer had seated himself opposite and was unwinding a large handkerchief which he had worn around his throat, the folds, as they fell, showing the bruised and swollen flesh, — “I am sorry I got to quarreling with you. I don’t know what in the world made me do it.”

Baintree paused in unrolling his neck-gear, and glanced keenly at the troubled and downcast face.

“I dunno what made ye do it, nuther. I be sorry, too. I hev got reason ter be. An’ if ye call it *quar’lin’* — it’s toler’ble survigrous *quar’lin’*, I will say.”

The flames in the chimney cowered as the wind swept down, and crouched like a beaten thing. The smoke puffed into the room. The gusts had a wild, insurgent, menacing note. The batten shutter rattled. The rain redoubled its force upon the roof. The place seemed infinitely solitary, and distant, and forlorn.

“I wish I had never heard of the silver. I wish I had let it alone,” said Rathburn, from out his moody reflections.

“That ain’t goin’ ter do ye no good,” declared Baintree suddenly. “Ye’ll go right back ter it, same ez a frog ter water. Them ez hanker arter it hev got the love of it rooted in ’em. Hey, Lord! I ’lowed wunst ez I hed enough

o' it. I 'lowed thar war a everlastin' curse on it. Arter Sam'l Keale, he jes' vamosed like he done, an' they 'rested me, an' I hed ter go ter jail an' be tried fur my life — an' paid everything I hed in the world, even my gun, an' my pistol, ter the lawyer, fur defendin' me — I 'lowed 't war kase I hed hankered arter the silver ez the Lord hid away in the hills. An' I did n't keer no mo' fur it then. Not even whenst ye kem ter physic me, an' seen that piece o' float I hed kerried jes' by accident in my pocket. Not even whenst ye 'peared so streck of a heap, an' kep' sayin' how rich, — how rich 't war. Naw, sir! An' whenst I kem home, I tuk consrider'ble pains ter git religion. I 'lowed I war n't goin' ter gin the Lord no mo' excuse fur goin' back on me. I got religion an' sot out ter save my soul. I hed hed enough o' sarchin' arter silver an' hevin' nuthin' ter kem o' it, so I hed sot out a-sarchin' arter salvation. I wanted ter find suthin' this time! I wanted ter be a prosperous saint o' the Lord, an' what with knowin' how ter read an' write, I mought git 'lected ter office some day, ef I stood well in the church. Could n't find salvation, nuther! This hyar Teck Jepson kem a-pouncin' down on me at the very water's aidge, whenst I war a-goin' ter be baptized an' wash my sins away, an' git the right sperit ter lead my feet ter heaven, an' he war a-totin' Sam'l's old gyarments what I hid ter be rid of 'em, an' Pa'son renounced me. So now I hev got ter go ter hell — but hevin' lived sech a life in Brum-saidge ez hev been my sheer, I reckon 't won't be sech a turr'ble change ez most folks find it."

"Come, Jake, you don't have to be baptized to go to heaven!" exclaimed Rathburn. He was looking at his fireside companion with an anxious commiseration upon his deprecatory, flushed face, despite the laugh that fluctuated over it.

But the rustic, however he may be awakened to a sense of his ignorance of mundane matters, stoutly maintains all the arrogations of a spiritual adept. The mountaineer sneered the theological proposition scornfully away.

"Ye dunno nuthin' 'bout'n it — I hev hearn ye say things ez makes me 'low ye ain't haffen a b'liever; ye 'pear ter sense religious things mighty porely! Ef ye read the Bible mo', an' yer g'ology an' min'ology, ez ye call 'em, less, ye'd be mo' able ter entertain the sperit, ef ye ever war ter hev a chance."

As he shook his head drearily over the fire, the sombre reflections evoked by his review of his forlorn, distraught fate imprinted on his pallid, clear-cut face, his throat momentarily showing more definitely the marks of the fingers that had clutched it, his poverty, and its concomitant hopelessness, despite his native cleverness, expressed in his rough jeans clothes, and his broken boots, and his bent old hat, Rathburn's heart smote him anew.

"Jake," he said, an insistent inward monitor clamoring against him, "you don't know how sorry I am that I was so — so harsh." He adopted in his uncertainty a word that Baintree often used; it expressed for him many phases of the physical and temporal world. "You don't know how badly I feel about it."

"Waal," said Baintree, carefully abstaining from any intimation of being appeased, although he made no definite sign of resentment. "I feel toler'ble bad myse'f." He touched his throat with a gingerly gesture, as he rearranged his neck-gear. It appealed to Rathburn with all the power that the sight of physical injury, however slight, exerted upon him. He could without compunction have lacerated his fellow-creature's sentiments, but for his cuticle he had a humane professional regard, and remorse found him an easy prey.

"I'd give a hundred dollars if I had n't done it," he said.

"Waal — *I* would n't," Baintree protested, with mock earnestness, "kase I never hed a hunderd dollars in all my life ter give," he added dryly.

Rathburn turned aside, clearing his throat with a sound that was much like a stifled groan.

There was silence for some moments between them. The rain splashed ceaselessly into the gullies below the eaves. The roof leaked in more than one place, and now and then a solemn, intrusive series of drops fell upon the floor, with a deliberate iteration of chilly intimations. Once Rathburn thought he heard a wolf howl at no great distance, and then doubted if it were not the wind sounding a new and savage pipe.

He began to fancy that Baintree, relishing his contrition, was disposed to make the most of it, and give him as much to be sorry for as his capacity for repentance could accommodate. But he strove to banish this caviling mood, incongruous with the injury he had done, and the regret and humiliation that it had entailed. His perceptions, however, could not be denied the prominent lugubriousness of Baintree's mien, albeit his mental faculties were interdicted any deductions therefrom.

Baintree's voice had a latent reproach in its very tones as he resumed : —

“An’ then whenst I war a-tryin’ ter git over that back-set — findin’ out thar war n’t no mo’ room fur me in heaven than thar war on yearth — up ye hed ter pop, like a devil out’n a bush, a-goin’ ter sarch in the mountings fur silver, sech ez that float ez I hed. An’ ye got me set ter honin’ an’ hankerin’ arter silver an’ sech — whenst I mought hev knowed ez Satan war in it, through Sam’l’s takin’ off bein’ so durned cur’ous.” He rubbed his hands silently for a few minutes as he looked at the fire. “That war the reason I tuk ye ter Jepson’s old cabin ter bide a-fust — I ’lowed ye mought find sech float ’mongst them steep ledges an’ rocky slopes.”

Rathburn looked up at him with an alert and kindling eye. His sense of humiliation, his troubled conscience, were forgotten in an instant. “We never went near the cave!” he exclaimed. “That was where the fellow was going. That is where you tracked his steps, Jake.” He

rose to his feet and leaned over and clapped his comrade on the shoulder. "We'll find it yet. There's the ore. We'll explore the cave!"

The color had flared into his face; his lips curved hopefully under his yellow mustache; his hand stroked it with his wonted alert, confident gesture.

The mountaineer looked up at him with a face cadaverous in its extreme pallor and the elongation of all its traits. His remonstrant eyes had a presage of hopeless defeat in the midst of their anxious entreaty.

"*That* won't do, Eugene," he said, in palpitating eagerness. "Laws-a-massy, boy, we can't go rummagin' round a dead man's bones fur silver!"

He seemed to take note of the unmoved resolution in Rathburn's expression. In his despair and fear he sought to assume a casual air of confidence which might impose upon his companion, however little root it had in fact.

"But shucks! ye would n't *dare* to go a meddlin' round dead folks. Ye know ye be afeard o' 'em!"

"*I?*" exclaimed Rathburn, glancing down at him with a bantering smile, "*I?* — afraid of dead men's bones?"

Still looking up into his flushed, handsome, triumphant face, full of life, and light, and spirit, Baintree quailed. For did he not remember, so late though it was, his coadjutor's profession? And had he not once seen, in the back room of Rathburn's office, a bleached white skull that the young physician considered a beautiful thing? The sight was renewed to Baintree's recollection with the vivid dread of a nightmare. He felt a suffocating pressure upon his chest. A hoarse, wheezing, half-smothered unconscious cry broke from his lips.

"Why, Jake!" Rathburn began, in a cheerful, rallying, reassuring tone; but the mountaineer had started to his feet, and the impetuous torrent of words would not be stopped.

"Ye air puttin' a rope round my neck! Ye — knowin' the Brumsaidge boys like ye do! Ef they war ter find his

bones — ye know, ye know what would happen! O God A'mighty!" He struck his long, lean hands together as he held them above his head. "An' ye'd do it! Ye'd put a rope round my neck fur the bare chance, the bare chance o' findin' the silver! O Lord! I hev been gin over — plumb gin over! What ailed me," he went on, in frantic self-reproach, — "what ailed me ter tell the true place, many a lie ez I hev tole? Even the Devil fursook me, — never whispered me nare lie ter tell this time, — this time, when a lie would hev saved my life! What ailed me ter tell the place — the place" —

"Oh Jake, stop — *hush!*" exclaimed Rathburn, irritably.

"Oh, I never 'lowed ez ye'd sarch that spot — ez ye'd put me in danger — the man ez gin ye all the chance ye ever hed" —

"Mighty good chance!" sneered Rathburn, losing patience. "A piece of float that another fellow found, God knows where, — stop that racket, Jake!"

"Stop!" cried the mountaineer, still clasping and unclasping his hands above his head as he moved convulsively about the floor. "Why n't ye ax that thar worm in the fire," — he pointed his quivering hand at a wretched, writhing thing that the heat had summoned from its nest in the rotten heart of the log forth into the midst of the flames, to turn hither and thither in a futile frenzy until consumed, — "why n't ye ax that worm ter stop?"

"Go on, then, and have a fit," said Rathburn coolly, "or work yourself into a fever." He pointed to a small medicine-chest. "Shan't cost you anything, — got that advantage over the worm."

His ridicule and his assumption of indifference were salutary. Baintree paused, looking restlessly about for a moment, then he returned to the hearth, shoving his chair with his knee back into the corner where he had sat before. His fear was not allayed, however, nor his sense of injury assuaged.

"Oh, ye air a mighty aggervatin' cuss, Eugene Rathburn!" he declared, lowering hopelessly at him across the hearth. "Ef I hed lived the life other men do, an' hed hed my sheer o' the good luck other folks gits, I'd hev too much sperit ter let ye kerry things like ye do. I'd kill ye afore I'd let ye harm me!"

"I ain't going to harm you," said Rathburn casually. He did not even remember his clutch on his comrade's throat.

"Ef I hed n't been through with jes' what I hev been through with, ye would n't treat me so. Ye would n't dare treat another man — Teck Jepson, say — this-a-way."

"Now I'm not afraid of Teck Jepson; you can bet high on that," Rathburn protested, with a sudden flush. "You are such a fool, Jake, though you think yourself very smart indeed, that you make all sorts of mistakes, and you want me to make them, too. You ought never to have said that the man fell into a cave or chasm — for you don't know it." That continually recurrent doubt again crossed his mind, and he cast a quick, suspicious glance across the hearth at Baintree, whose trembling hands were spread out to the fire, his pallid face bearing that recent impress of a strong nervous shock, indescribable, but as unmistakable as the print of a blow. "You ought never to have hid his coat and hat, — and, by the way, the Broomsedge despot took no measures to punish you for that, — and I dare say if the man's bones were found even now in a cave on *his* land, people would like to know how *his* cave came by them."

Baintree looked up with a sudden flash of his former sly intelligence, then bent his brooding eyes once more on the fire.

"Especially," Rathburn continued, after a pause, "as they were always on bad terms. You would be in a better position to stand such a discovery than Jepson, for the jury has said that you had nothing to do with his bones. What did Jepson quarrel with him about?"

Baintree never spoke of the victim of the catastrophe save with a bated voice and a strained, anxious expression, almost a contortion in its speculative keenness to detect the lack of confidence that was the usual sequence of his words.

"'Bout'n the way he treated his wife."

"His wife? — thought he was a young fellow, a mere boy."

"He war married young, —'bout twenty. Gal war young, too. They did n't agree tergether. Some folks 'lowed he beat her, but Sam'l's kin declared they jes' fought tergether — her bein' ez survigrous ez him. But Jepson went over thar one day whenst she hed her head tied up, 'lowin' her husband hed busted it, an' he gin Sam'l a turr'ble trouncin'. *He* hed *his* head tied up arter that."

"I suppose she did n't mourn her loss?" suggested Rathburn, with a jeering smile.

"Took on turr'ble a-fust, an' married agin 'fore the year war out."

"Glad to get rid of him, eh?"

"*He'd* hev been mighty glad ter git rid o' *her*. Useter 'low sometimes ez he'd run away from her ef he hed enny-whar ter run ter, an' from Jepson, too. He war turr'ble 'feard o' Jepson. He useter 'low sometimes ez he wisht he hed never kem from North Car'liny, whar he useter live an' work in a silver mine. It gin out, though, an' war n't wuth nuthin' ter its owners."

"I wonder," said Rathburn speculatively, "if that is n't where he is right now."

"Hed n't been hearn on thar at the time o' the trial," said Baintree.

"Or else," pursued Rathburn meditatively, "if in trouncing him, according to his royal prerogative, Jepson might not have overdone the chastisement, and stowed away the evidences of how justice had overborne mercy in that cave of his."

Both would have liked to credit this, but Baintree shook his head.



"I don't believe Keale fell into any cave," Rathburn presently resumed, — "a deft-footed mountaineer! He either went in there searching for silver, or he was put in there for some purpose, or he has run away from his matrimonial infelicity and the despot of Broomsedge Cove."

He paused to kick the chunks of the logs together, between the stones that served as fire-dogs, for they were burnt out now save for their bulky and charred ends. The flames leaped up anew. The smoke had ceased to puff into the room, but its aroma, with the pungent fragrance of the wood, lingered in the air. The worm, in which Jake Baintree had descried a parallel of cruelly perplexed anguish, was gone, and the world was as if it had never been. The sinuous contortions of his fear and harassment continued with hardly more hope of ultimate rescue. Nevertheless, like the worm, he could but strive.

"Eugene," he said, "let's leave the cave alone. Su'thin' dreadful will kem o' it ef we go meddlin' thar. Ye know ye don't want ter put me in no danger wuss 'n I be in now. Ye would n't, now would ye?" in an unctuous, coaxing voice, and with an appealing look.

"Why, not for worlds, Jake, not for worlds!" exclaimed Rathburn heartily.

A sigh of relief was on the lips of the suspected man, a gleam of renewing life in his jaded eye. There had not yet been time to evolve doubt, suspicion, qualification, before Rathburn spoke again.

"Nothing that I am going to do can injure anybody. I was placed in far greater jeopardy by your concealments and mystery about the forge than ever you will be by anything I counsel or do."

"Ye mean ye won't go ter the cave?" said Baintree, his lips dry and moving with seeming difficulty.

"Now don't be an ignoramus and a fool, Jake. Of course I shall look for more of the float about the cave. I believe that's where the man found it. I should be a fit subject

for the lunatic asylum if I did n't search there, and that's just what you are. No harm in the world can come of it. Why," taking a bit of paper from his pocket and deftly rolling a cigarette, — "why, Jake," — he spoke in answer to Baintree's silent look, — "what would you have done if, some of those days when we were at Jepson's house, I had stumbled on the mouth of that cave?"

He cocked the cigarette between his teeth, its tiny red tip brightly flaring, for the room was growing dull and dusky, and looked with an expression of good-natured argument at Baintree across the hearth.

The mountaineer's ruminative eyes were fixed upon him. "I tuk good pains ye should n't," he admitted, in a tone, however, which implied that he had yielded the previous points of controversy. "I never guided ye in that d'rection."

Rathburn took his cigarette from his mouth, emitted an airy wreath of smoke, and shook his head seriously from side to side. Then as he smoked on he said, "I have a very pretty quarrel with you, Jake. By your own confession, you have systematically deceived me for a matter of six months or more. You made me believe that *you* had found the float, and of course knew where you found it, when you were only trying to get the benefit of such scientific knowledge as I had, — to discover mineral where there was no reason to believe it to be. If you were not so ignorant you would n't have tried a foolish, hopeless dodge like that. You have made me work very hard at this wild-goose chase, digging, and tramping, and blacksmithing, and *you* got me into a scrape that might have cost *me my* life. Indeed, but for that timely warning that put me on my guard and made me behave like a man instead of a sheep-killing dog, I believe it *would* have cost me my life."

His face grew grave and conscious at the thought of Marcella. He sat silent for a moment or two, looking steadfastly at the fire and turning the cigarette delicately between his fingers.

"It is absurd, because you are afraid of this, and afraid of that, to ask me to give up the whole thing or to go and search where there are no indications, or very slight ones, as you had me do all summer, when you knew where the only chances lay. But I forgive you, and I'm not going to do anything that can possibly injure you."

Baintree was sitting so still in the dusky gloom of the darkening cabin that he hardly seemed alive. With the brown color of his coat dimly suggested on the duller tones about him, he looked like an effigy of a man rudely fashioned from a root.

"What be ye a-goin' ter do?" he demanded.

The lack of candor could hardly be urged against Eugene Rathburn among his many and conspicuous faults.

"I'm going to search that cave from end to end, if the good Lord spares me," he asseverated. "That's what I'm going to do. There's nothing there that I shan't find."

His cigarette, so far spent it was, required some deft manipulation that it should not burn his fingers or lips and yet yield the last treasures of nicotian luxury that it contained. His attention was fixed upon it, and he lost the look with which Jake Baintree received this unequivocal statement. When he glanced up, the mountaineer had risen and was filling his pipe from some tobacco on the mantelpiece.

"Going to smoke?" asked Rathburn. "Well, good-night to you, for I'm going to turn in."

He spread upon the floor a thick rug and a heavy blanket, placing one end over the saddle to serve as pillow, and as he lay before the dying fire he seemed to take scant heed of the vigil of the silent, watchful Baintree, still erect in his chair, and still smoking his pipe. Only once the young townsman stirred after he lay down. "How good the rain sounds on the roof," he said drowsily. A few moments afterward he was doubtless asleep — a sound, dreamless slumber, the close counterfeit of death, motionless, silent, deep. Nevertheless Jake Baintree hardly felt sure of its

genuineness until after he had arisen and arranged his own pallet with some unnecessary stir, that might have seemed an experiment to judge if the sleeper would rouse again on any slight provocation. Then he sat down once more and meditatively eyed the red embers, dwindling, still dwindling in the white and gray ashes.

The monotone of the rain still beat on the roof; he heard the wind from far away; the vague stir of the crumbling fire was distinguishable, although it might seem so fine and subtle a rustle would have been lost in the sound of aught else. The muffled figure on the floor was still discernible in the red glow; even the yellow hair showed in a dull gleam amidst the umber tones of the shadows. Jake Baintree's eyes were upon it as with a careful hand he reached into a crevice of the jamb of the chimney and drew forth something that had a sudden steely glitter even in the semi-obscurity, and laid it cautiously on his knee.

He did not move for some time afterward, although in the increasing dusk his shadowy figure could hardly have been distinguished from the inanimate shadows about him. Presently his hands were moving softly to and fro with swift, industrial intentness.

Even the embers seemed to cling to life and yield it with the reluctance and vacillating struggle pathetically typical of the passing of human breath. Their sparkle, and verve, and flamboyant energies were all spent, but suddenly they sent forth an unexpected red glow, strong in the midst of the ashes, that was like the transitory revival in the last flickering moments of a doomed creature.

It irradiated Baintree's wary bright eyes fixed abruptly upon it, as he sat in the corner. So sudden was its flare that he had not an instant to prepare for it, and a whisking feather in his hand still mechanically moved to and fro as he oiled a pistol, now and then dipping the tip of the quill into a tin vessel that stood on the jagged edge of the jamb beside him. He gazed with alert anxiety at the sleeping

man upon the floor. The room was fully revealed in the melancholy red suffusion ; Rathburn's face was distinct with its far-away, unconscious expression. He did not stir ; he saw naught of what he might have thought strange enough in the dead hour of the midnight, — Jake Baintree slipping cartridge after cartridge into the six chambers of Dr. Rathburn's neglected revolver, not loaded before since he had come to the mountains in August.

## XXI.

THE storm wrought great havoc in the aspect of the outer world. The dull light of the autumn days that ensued served to show how the red and gold of the leaves had faded, and what resources of brown and a sere tawny gray the ultimate stages of decay held in store. They were thickly massed on the ground now, and most of the boughs were bare and wintry, and swayed, black with moisture, against the clouds, that in their silent shifting illustrated an infinite gradation of neutral tints between pearl and purple. Yet they seemed still, these clouds, so imperceptibly did each evolution develop from the previous presentments of vapor.

Far away the gray mountains appeared akin to the dun cloud-masses they touched, as if range and peak were piled one above the other almost to the zenith. Certain fascinating outlines of the distance, familiars of the fair weather, were withdrawn beneath this lowering sky, and strangely enough the landscape seemed still complete and real without them, as if they had been merely some fine illusions of hope, some figment of a poetic mood, painted in tender tints upon an inconstant horizon. Close at hand the heights loomed grim and darkly definite. In dropping the mask of foliage they showed fierce features hitherto concealed, — gaunt crags and chasms, and awful beetling steepes; ravines, deeply cleft in the heart of the range; torrents, flung headlong down the precipices to be lost in the river; many sterile, bare rocky slopes.

To Marcella a new glow of interest was shed upon the sombre scene; often she looked up at those more open expanses, wondering where, in the vast bewilderment of the fast-

nesses, the stranger and his mountain guide had made their temporary home. Far away as they were, he seemed near in the definiteness of her new knowledge of him. And this she supplemented by knowledge not so definite. With this basis for speculation, her imagination constructed, with all the ease of that airy workmanship, a status for his previous life, endowed him with a series of predilections and prejudices, and many noble ideal qualities with which Rathburn might have found himself somewhat embarrassed, having had but scant experience with such fine æsthetic gear. There were circumstances connected with his recent danger which gave her an intense satisfaction, — she had requited the good deed he had done that night when he had come to her father's aid through the storm. She had repaid the debt fourfold. She remembered, with a certain soft elation, how he had recognized the risk she had encountered, how he had esteemed it of no slight magnitude. It might have been vanity, it might have been some tenderer thrill astir, but it was sweet to her to hear again — as so easily she might, when she would — the quiver in his voice when he had declared that an angel of mercy, an angel had rescued him! Often she paused at her simple tasks to recall anew those fervent words, those earnest, swift glances, which said so much that the subtlest words might fail to convey. His gratitude held all the finest essences of the incense of flattery, and she recognized a unique delight in the fact that the words and the glances were so cleverly calculated for her alone. Always her lips curved, with that rarest relish of laughter, when it is for joy alone, unmarred by any element of scorn or ridicule, when she remembered her grandmother's satiric flouts at his "n'angel" and subsequent speculation as to which of the mountain girls he fancied, in his sentimental folly, had any resemblance to a celestial being. These thoughts were undulled by repetition. But one afternoon, on a bleak hillside, into their midst a certain shadow fell — a shadow as gray, as chill, as prophetic, as if it were akin

to the gray, chill, prophetic shadows of the day that stood, dejected, on every slope, and waited as for a doom. She had gone out to salt the sheep, and she carried a gourd of salt in her hand. Her bonnet — it was of a gay yellow calico — hung on her shoulders, the strings knotted about her neck, and her heavy, waving brown tresses falling over it almost hid its assertive color beneath their curling luxuriance. Her dress was of a more sombre tone; it had encountered disasters in its dyes, and had not withstood the test of soap and water. It was difficult to say whether the result were a darkly brownish green or a darkly greenish brown. It was not incongruous with the dulling tints of the landscape; as she stood, it served to define her light, lithe figure distinctly against the tawny stretches of broomsedge behind her, that rose gradually to the summit of the hill. There seemed the full development of its tentative shade in the dark green of the pines clustering along the background of the mountain. Gray rocks cropped out of the red clay gullies that scarred the descent at her feet. In all the monotony of the scene, the flaring yellow about her throat seemed a triumphant climax of color, so luminous and intense it was. Her eyes were fixed on the gray sky opposite, for she looked far over the sere valleys, where it bent its great concave to a low level. Her hand hesitated as it was thrust into the brown gourd that she held. The sullen elements had no power to dim the fair, rich tints of her face, and grave though it was, it bore the happy trace of recent smiles. The sheep pressed close about her, the black sheep of the flock, all unaware of his unenviable metaphorical notoriety among men, preferring his claim for salt with calm assurance. She was motionless for a moment, then, as if the thought had come to her for the first time, "Why hev he never, never kem agin?" she said.

Her mind went back slowly, to count the days. It was difficult to differentiate them, they were all so alike. As she reviewed the trivial incidents that might serve to



individualize them, keeping a tally with her fingers on the gourd, she began to realize what she had not noticed before, — that lately there had been many visitors at the house, not her own, nor her grandmother's ; men, chiefly, wanting to see Eli Strobe. The doctor's orders had precluded their entrance, being rigorously obeyed since they subserved the pride of the women, who had sought to shield Strobe's infirmity from general observation in Broomsedge Cove.

"We-uns don't want 'em 'round hyar a-crowin' over Eli in the pride o' sech brains ez they hev got, till he hev hed a fair chance ter git well," Mrs. Strobe had said to her granddaughter. "Folks knowed ez he war out'n his head with fever an' his mind wandered some whenst he war fust knocked down, but nobody suspicions ez he hev plumb gone deranged 'bout killin' Teck Jepson 'ceptin' them two doctor men an' Andy Longwood, an' I know they ain't goin' ter tell."

Many, then, had been to the door of late, but the yellow-haired young stranger had come no more, and Marcella wondered, with a dull presage of gloom, would he ever come again.

When next the chords of memory vibrated with his declaration that an angel had saved him, it had a jarring clangor of doubt, of ridicule, that made its wonted dulcet iteration a discord. Human nature is not generally so recognizant of celestial condescension and kindness that much is necessarily implied in the protestation of equivalent gratitude and indebtedness to an earthly benefactor. Marcella did not realize this. Was it thus, she asked herself, that he would have passed her by if he had felt in his heart the word upon his lips ?

Now and again the gourd in her hand was nudged by the soft nozzle of a sheep, and she would once more bethink herself to cast a handful of salt down upon the rock as the flock pressed about her. There was no other stir in all the broad spaces she overlooked save the vibrations of the wind

in the bare boughs that clashed together with a dull rattling sound, and the rustling shiver through the tawny tufts of broomsedge.

She gave a great start when her eyes were abruptly concentrated upon an object in the midst of its tall growth half-way down the hill, beginning slowly to move, to rise. It seemed to her suddenly recalled attention, still dazed by the transition from the world of thought to the more exigent material sphere, as if it were some gigantic mushroom toiling up the ascent, having just come in sight above a projecting knoll of earth. Beneath the broad bent hat she presently discerned a chubby dark-eyed face, and the rest of the person of a fat young fellow-creature of the age of four, perhaps, arrayed in a short, stout homespun skirt and a straight waist tightly encircling a singularly round body, was revealed to view.

So unexpected was this apparition, despite its simplicity, that as she gazed she was not aware that a man had ascended the hill farther to the right, and stood leaning on a long rifle silently contemplating her. Not until he spoke did she turn.

"Ain't ye goin' ter giu me nare word, Marcelly?" said Teck Jepson.

She flushed deeply. Surprised and taken thus at a disadvantage, she forgot for a moment her anger toward him.

"I never seen ye — howdy," she said meekly.

Her flush was instantly reflected on his face as the red glow of a sunset irradiates the alien eastern sky. There was a new light in his eyes. She detected in his voice something of the impetus of the false hope that lured him, although he only said casually, as if seeking to formally acquit her of any discourtesy, —

"I seen ye war noticin' Bob, thar, — he air a mighty s'prisin' sight down in the Cove, I know."

Even so slight a pleasantry seemed odd from him, so exacting a gravity he bore in his daily walk and conversation.

She subtly understood it as the outgushing happiness of the mistake under which he had fallen ; so trifling a hope, so slight a relenting counted for much in the depths of despair into which he had sunk. She would have been glad to undeceive him, but she was still agitated and confused by the sudden severance of her troubled and absorbed train of thought, and the abrupt surprise of his presence here. She merely said, " Air that leetle Bob Bowles, yer nevy ? "

He nodded, his face relaxing into its infrequent smile as he looked down at the plodding plumpness approaching through the broomsedge.

" He air visitin' ye, then, I reckon."

" Not edzac'y ; he hev runned away from home."

The fat Bob sat down upon one of the outcropping ledges of the rock near where the sheep crowded about Marcella, at whom he looked with apprehensive eyes. Mrs. Bowles was the only woman in his very restricted social circle with whom he was acquainted, and his experience with her did not tend to foster confidence in the sex.

" He looks at me ez ef he 'lowed I'd hurt him," cried Marcella, flushing and suddenly affronted. " I never knowed I war so turr'ble ez all that."

" Bob — Bob, ye look the other way!" Jepson admonished him.

But Bob, with scant regard, evidently, for Jepson's mandates, continued to gaze wincingly up at the fair face of the girl, meeting her indignant and grieved eyes. Detecting at last a protest in her expression, he lifted his chubby arm and crooked it over his head, a forlornly inadequate guard against the blow he expected.

" He thinks I'd hurt him!" she cried in a wounded manner. " Why, don't ye know I would n't fur nuthin', — fur nuthin' ? "

She sat down by him on the rock and took his little sunburned hand in her soft clasp. His eyes were alight and alert with fear. With a wonderful show of elasticity he

edged bouncingly along the ledge to evade her overtures; but a sheep had lain down across the rock, and although he pressed close into the wool of the creature, it did not rise, and he was at the mercy of his captor. She still held the gourd of salt, and the flock crowded about with insistent, rummaging nozzles. One of the sheep, standing on the higher ground behind her, looked pensively over her shoulder at the broad mountain landscape, the delicate, slender head of the animal almost touching the bright hair so heavily curling on her yellow sun-bonnet, still hanging loosely about her neck.

The graceless Bob! Jepson could only lean his six feet of helplessness upon his long rifle, and earnestly breathe that sinking hope against hope known only to those who have callow relatives placed in a conspicuous and exacting position, with every opportunity for lamentable infringement of etiquette. Did ever so doubtful, suspicious, and terrified a look, as Bob cast upward, meet such suave, sweet, smiling eyes? Was ever a round, dodging, bullet head so evasively shifted from beneath so light a caress as the touch of those falling curling tresses? How wasted, how inopportunately wasted on Bob her soft words, —

“ I love ye — an’ I want ye ter love me ! ”

But Bob, who evidently harbored a distrust in amazing disproportion to his small size and his tender years, was proof against even so enchanting a siren. He merely knitted his limited eyebrows in perplexity because of the unexpected nature of the attack, for that unhappy and striking developments were to ensue he did not permit himself to disbelieve for an instant. He left his hand in hers, for his theory that least resistance resulted in the minimum smart had been proved often enough to commend it. A short little puff of breath — in an adult it might have been called a sigh — escaped from his half-parted lips, and betokened suspense.

“ How ye all mus’ hev treated him up on the mounting ! ”

Marcella exclaimed, flashing her angry eyes upward at Teck Jepson. "He's 'feard — an' jes' see the leetle size of him! He's 'feard; he would n't dodge that-a-way ef he hed n't been hit a heap o' times fur nuthin'. Who treats him so mean?"

Jepson hesitated. Certainly he owed naught to Mrs. Bowles, but they had been of the same household, and he had a reluctance to expose her to scorn and contumely, however richly merited.

Marcella noted his hesitation and broke forth impulsively, "I don't wonder ye look 'shamed of it."

He shifted his position suddenly, and as he gazed at her, still leaning on the rifle, his eyes widely open, his lips parted, his breath coming quick, it might have seemed that he had need of his weapon to uphold him, — he was shaken as if by a blow.

"Marcelly!" he exclaimed, — and the voice hardly seemed his, so unlike was the husky quaver to his wonted full, mellow tones, — "kin ye think that o' me, — ez 't war me ez hev persecuted that thar leetle bit of a critter?"

He paused and looked about him with an air of finality. His nerves were still distraught; his lip quivered. She sat, a little pale and shaken by the sight of his agitation, gazing up at him from under her eyebrows, and hardly lifting her head, expectant, waiting, but making no sign of denial.

"Waal," he said, drawing himself to his full height, "this finishes it. I hev b'lieved, I hev lived in hope ez some day ye mought kem ter keer fur me, 'spite o' all that hev kem an' gone. But now ez I hev fund out how awful mean ye think I be, ez ye kin b'lieve fur one minnit ez I hed enny hand in tormentin' a leetle trembly soul like that, I'll gin hope up. I'll trouble ye with my feelin's no mo'. An' I'll never furgive ye whilst I live!"

Marcella sat quite still and with downcast eyes during this outburst. There was something very like a sob in his throat as he spoke the last words, but when she glanced up

again his face was so calm, his gaze so loftily discursive as he cast his eyes over the landscape, his attitude so impressive and striking, that she interpreted this serenity of pride as triumph, and she suddenly felt a goad in his last avowal.

"Waal, strange ez it may seem," she said, tossing her hair backward, and the breeze, catching the locks, flung them gayly about, "I kin live without it. An' I hev hearn ye talk 'bout yer feelin's an' sech till thar's mighty leetle entertainment lef' in 'em. An' treatin' this hyar leetle chile mean, till he looks ter be beat ef a body glances thar eye at him, 'pears ter me mightily of a piece with bein' the captain o' a gang o' lynchers an' sech evil doin's."

There was a momentary silence. Her eyes, restless, unseeing, wandered vaguely over the broad brown expanse of valley and mountain. Once more she bethought herself of the sheep, and poured the salt out of the gourd on the ground. The excitement of the moment pulsed heavily in her temples; she felt a gnawing pain at her heart, and she was unhappy.

The cause of all this trouble hardly comported himself in a congruous manner. Bob was relieved when her attention was diverted from him, and gave a fat little sigh of content. He sat for a moment quite still, looking very rotund in build, contemplating the resources of the scene for juvenile enjoyment. Then leaning forward, he placed his broad white wool hat on the unsuspecting head of a sheep near at hand, and it was difficult to say whether the smothered "baa" that proceeded from the eclipsed beast, or its groping as it rose to its feet, or its unique aspect as it stood, with the hat on its head, uncertain what might ensue, was the chief factor in eliciting a low, jovial chuckle from the distended gleeful lips.

But neither of his elders noticed the wiles of the callow martyr, for Jepson's attention was fixed upon the revelation contained in Marcella's last words, and she, realizing now

their full significance, was nervously biting her lips in futile regret that they had thence escaped.

"I hev no call ter gin account o' sech ez I do ter you-uns," he said, with that serene arrogance which she had always felt was intolerable, and which she had in vain sought to reduce. "I'd hev been mighty pleased ef ye hed thunk well o' my deeds an' could hev put enny dependence in me, but ef ye don't, it don't make me think no ill o' myself nor my aims. I ain't got two faces, ter turn this one, an' ef ye don't like its looks, turn that one. I be led by sech light ez the Sperit hev revealed ter me, an' I don't ax ye nor enny other human ter show me the way an' guide my feet." He paused, looking reflectively at the broomsedge waving about his high boots; then he recommenced suddenly. "Bein' ez ye hev got a interus' in the man ez tole ye I war a captain o' a gang o' lynchers, ye hed better warn him not ter let his jaw wag too slack, — not about *me*; I ain't keerin' what he say 'bout *me*, but them t' other men mought hear o' his talkin' too free, an' I ain't round about the *Settlement* much, an' could n't hender 'em ef they war ter set out ter do him a damage. Tell him that. They air powerful outdone with me ennyhow, kase I would n't gin my cornsent ter sech ez they wanted that night he kem ter the forge."

Marcella hardly breathed, so strong upon her was the terror of jeopardizing the safety of Rathburn.

"How do ye know who tole me?" she demanded, gazing up at him with a feint of defiance in her contracted eyebrows and curling lip. "Ye may be talkin' 'bout one man, an' me 'bout another."

He looked straight into the clear depths of her eyes. They faltered suddenly, and the long lashes fell as he said, —

"Naw, we be both talkin' 'bout'n that Doctor Rathburn, ez he calls hisse'f, — that be who we air talkin' 'bout."

She leaned back silently against a rugged bowlder

amongst the outcropping ledges, the gourd, empty now, the neck of it still in her listless hand, lying beside her on the trampled broomsedge. Her greenish-brown dress was much like the mosses in the fissures of the gray rock, against the cold monotone of which her fair young face seemed so delicately and finely tinted. The flock had scattered, feeding amongst the brambles and on tufts of grass that seemed, beneath the fallen leaves, to have escaped the frost. The sheep that had worn the hat rid himself of it at last, and looked on stupidly when the little mountaineer, with an agile elasticity of gait incongruous with his infantile rotundity, ran out and triumphantly crowned another, slipping back to his seat beside Marcella, and attracting no notice save from the placid flock, pausing to gaze in mild-eyed wonder.

"I ain't lookin' ter see that man agin," said Marcella, her eyes fixed on the summits across the broad valley. "I can't tell him."

She paused, in the hope that he might ask if she had not seen him lately, but Jepson could be betrayed into no unseemly show of curiosity, and she was presently fain to continue.

"I ain't seen him sence he war at our house that night. I dunno what's kem o' him."

He stood impassive, silent, leaning upon his rifle, which he held with one hand, while the other was thrust in his leather belt. When she spoke he looked down at her, and his eyes met hers, but when she was silent he glanced with grave preoccupation at the leaden sky or the sombre ranges.

"I 'lowed mebbe he hed gone home," she said, after one of these intervals. It was so recently that she had become definitely aware how long it had been since he was at the house, how fully the recollection of his words had sufficed in the certain expectation of his return, that she was for the first time canvassing the probabilities.

"Mebbe so," he replied non-committally.

She gave a sudden quick gasp, and turned pale.



"Them men — them men, mebbe, hev tuk him at las'. They waylaid him agin, — hev they? — hev they?"

"Not ez I hev hearn on," he replied.

His evident lack of excitement in regard to the possibility roused her anger anew. Her nerves were all a-quiver under the unexpected strain. She hardly sought to control her words; they were a relief to her tense, overwrought anxiety.

"How kin ye stand thar an' 'low, 'Not ez I hev hearn on,' ez keerless ez ef I war a-talkin' 'bout a fox ketched in a trap? Ye *don't* keer, Teck Jepson, ye *don't* keer! Ye 'd jes' ez soon he would be kilt by them mis'able Brumsaidge rangers ez not. Ye air a cruel, bloodthirsty man. Ye *don't* keer ef the innercent stranger war kilt."

Despite his protestations of independence of spirit, he was roused to defend himself against this imputation.

"Ef I hed n't keered," he said, his lip curling with a scornful half laugh, and his eyes far away, "I would 't hev gone with them fellers at the barn. I 'lowed I could hender 'em from doin' ennything onjust, or hasty, or mischievious, though ef the stranger hed been at enny wicked device, I dunno ez I would hev pertected him an' sot him free like I done."

Marcella's heart was throbbing with contending emotions, the dominant feeling a resentment that Teck Jepson should thus credit himself with the rescue of Rathburn, the merits of which that young gentleman's rhetoric had greatly exalted in her estimation, for she had thought it a simple, natural, matter-of-course action when she had first been moved to do aught in his behalf. She had logic enough to realize, however, that her timely warning and Rathburn's clever boldness would have availed little had not Jepson's mood been judicial, and the sway which he exerted over his comrades perfect and complete. Nevertheless her claim was not to be easily belittled. Her ingenuity renewed its hold.

"Then," she said, "ye let him off, I'll be bound, not kase

ye knowed 't war right an' jestice but jes' kase ye fund out ez 't war me ez hed warned the man, an' ye 'lowed 't would put me in a good humor with you-uns ef ye war ter help me out an' save his life. Ye done it ter please me."

He was not quite sure he understood her at first. He seemed dumfounded; then, as the light of comprehension dawned in his eyes, he looked down into her face and laughed.

"Kem, Bob," he said, turning away, "it's time we-uns war a-travelin'."

But Bob had met a young friend of somewhat his own tastes and disposition. A lamb had strayed near where he was sitting, and the two had spent some profitable moments in gazing silently at one another with that irresistible curiosity and manifest fellow-feeling which infancy has for infancy. What they thought each of the other no one can ever say. That the scrutiny was not mutually derogatory in its results may be inferred from the fact that the lamb leaped suddenly to one side on its slender, knobby little legs, with a sort of aquiline alacrity, and kicked up some very frolicsome heels. Whereupon Bob mitigated the intensity of his stare, and began to run about nimbly with his short skirts flying, his round body very straight, his agility seeming necessarily somewhat knock-kneed in order to give free play to such redundant calves. He showed a very merry pair of heels, that served him as well as the lamb's two pairs, and neither of the blithe young things took the smallest notice of Jepson's summons.

Marcella gave them no heed. She had never been so deeply wounded as by Jepson's evident surprise, his laugh, disclaiming the motive to please her. Always he had seemed to her secretly subservient to her power, however he might seek to assert his own independence. She was humiliated that she should have suggested her influence and received a renunciation rather than a protestation. It was as if he had told her that he did not love her so much as she

thought—not so blindly, so idolatrously. She had overflattered herself; her vanity had palpably convicted her. Strangely enough she was not angry. Every emotion was absorbed in the idea that he did not love her as she had thought he did—he had laughed at the supreme power which she assumed to wield over him.

She glanced up at him aslant under her long lashes. He was not looking at her. He had shouldered his rifle and was advancing upon the swiftly revolving Bob and his nimble four-footed acquaintance.

“Kem on, bubby. Kem on, Bob. We-uns mus’ go home now.”

But the gleeful Bob, with distended ruddy cheeks, and two rows of snagged white teeth, and gleaming eyes almost eclipsed in rolls of fat, continued his blithe circuit, finding a new joy in flapping his arms, in which he had an advantage over the lamb, who had no arms to flap, and who often paused with meditative lowered head to gaze at these gyrations.

“Kem on, Bob—or I’ll make ye! Ye’ll repent it, sir! Kem on!”

And once more Jepson approached the elusively whisking Bob. “Kem on! Like a good boy.” He resorted to entreaty.

But Bob evidently disbelieved in retribution from this source, and was hard-hearted enough to disregard softer suasion.

“He be a powerful obejient chile!” Marcella remarked, with a little satiric laugh.

“He’s young yit,” returned Jepson, flustered and mortified. “Whenst he gits a leetle older he’ll do better. Bob, I’ll let ye tote my shot-pouch, like ye love ter do.”

But Bob, with a soul above bribes, circled as before. Marcella, with an arch sidelong glance, turned from him to Jepson. “How mean ye must treat him! How ’feard o’ you-uns he do be!” she exclaimed with laughing irony.

A flush rose suddenly to his brow, and she saw anew how deeply wounded he had been by the ignoble and odious accusation. Little wonder, since he felt it so, that he had declared he would never forgive her.

"I furgot he hed a stepmother," she faltered by way of excuse.

"I never said nuthin' agin his stepmother," he rejoined sternly, darkly frowning.

Bob was beginning to show signs of exhaustion. As Jepson turned toward him again Marcella gave a sudden start. She felt she had done him a grievous injustice and she repented it. With some vague apologetic intention she sought to detain him on some pretext, — on any pretext, — and she spoke upon the impulse of the moment.

"Mus' I tell the folks at home ez ye never wunst thunk ter inquire arter them?" Her eyes were dewy and bright; a faint flush was in her cheek; the tender curves of her red lips wore a half-smiling sweetness; as she lifted her head upward to look at him, the hair curling on her shoulders fell still farther down over the dangling yellow sun-bonnet.

He turned a changed face. "I war 'feard ter ax, Marcella," he said, in his low melancholy drawl. "I know ye feel so hard ter me 'bout'n Eli — an' I never kin forgive myself, though I never went ter do no harm. I hear 'bout Eli constant — 'thout hevin' ter harry yer feelin's by axin' ye arter him."

The girl felt a certain reassurance, a satisfaction that in this at least he had not changed. Since he had wrought so grievous an injury to Eli Strobe, remorse was the meet sequence. But her alert intuition presently apprehended a tone not altogether applicable to the past.

"He air thrivin' toler'ble, now," she observed.

He glanced at her with the keen suspense of an unexpected hope shining in his eyes. "Then what they say at the Settlemint ain't true!"

She felt a sudden fear clutch at her heart. Her face paled — her eyes dilated.

"What air they sayin' agin him at the Settlemint?" she asked, trembling, yet roused into instant defiance.

"'Tain't faultin' Eli noways," he explained anxiously. "They 'low, though, ez his ailment hev streck his brain, an' he hev gone deranged."

Her short, sudden scream rang out shrilly in the dull silence of the gray afternoon. She sprang to her feet. "Who hev tole that — who hev tole that on him? I'll be bound them sly foxes at the Settlemint air plottin' su'thin agin him. They won't gin him time ter git well, an' they don't want ter let him be constable, what he hev done been 'lected ter be. Who hev tole it? Who hev tole it?" Her eyes flashed an insistent inquiry at him and he could only reply doubtfully, —

"I dunno, Marcellly. I jes' hearn a whole pack of 'em at the store" — she winced visibly at the idea of this wide dissemination of the rumor — "a-talkin' bout'n it. But I dunno who set it a-goin' fust."

"I do!" she exclaimed frantically. "That stranger — he 'peared tickled ter death whenst he fust noticed it. Never seen a man so streck by nuthin' in yer life. Tuk an' felt his pulse, sir, an' 'peared like he'd ruther hear sech foolishness talked 'n the sober wisdom o' Sol'mon! I war mad then — but what though bein' called a n'angel" — She broke off suddenly. "'T war him — 't war him — kase nobody else knowed it. Dad hain't seen nobody else 'ceptin' him an' Andy Longwood one day, — but Andy hain't got larnin' enough ter feel folkses pulses an' sense thar short-comin's an' sech. 'T war him! 'T war him! Oh, ye air all alike. I never see nobody ez I take a notion air mighty good an' fine, an' I go round like a fool studyin' 'bout 'em all day, but what — ef I know 'em long enough — I find out they air jes' plain common men-folks sech ez hev been sence the worl' began, — jes' like Adam, rather guzzle a

apple 'n bide in Paradise." She smiled reflectively, a scornful retrospection, as if the thought of some past folly were both bitter and ludicrous.

"Waal," she resumed, turning upon him, "what war they 'lowin' at the store they war goin' ter do 'bout'n it?"

He shifted his weight to the other foot, then leaned heavily on his gun. "I hate ter tell ye, Marcelly," he said with a low-spirited cadence. "I hoped 't war n't true."

"I mus' know," she asserted insistently.

"Waal," he reluctantly began, "they 'lowed ez some o' them 'smart Alecks' of politicians an' sech hed gin information ez thar war a crazy in the county ez oughter be restrained o' his liberty." A short exclamation, little less than a scream, came from her with an accent as if it were wrung forth by physical pain. "Ef the county court app'ints the sher'ff ter summons a jury fur a inquisition o' lunacy, an' they see Eli an' 'low he air insane, they think they kin git up perceedin's ez will take away his office."

She listened silently as she stood holding the empty gourd in her hand. He felt as if he were pronouncing a sentence of some terrible doom, in thus destroying her pride. She esteemed the humble office so high and noble an estate, its shattered incumbent the chief of men!

"Marcelly," he said, "look here. No matter what ye want ter do 'bout'n it, ef ye kin do ennything, I stand ready ter help. Promise me ye'll let me know. Promise me ye'll let me help."

She looked up at him. Her lips were compressed. Her eyes were dry and steady. "Help!" she echoed bitterly. "It's you-uns ez hev brung all this torment on dad. An' now ye talk about 'help.' It's too late — too late ter help." Then she turned away.

He stood watching her as she went; her dull greenish-brown dress was long visible against the tawny tints of the broomsedge; her head was bare, the yellow sun-bonnet still hanging upon her shoulders. A leaden cloud was coming

down the opposite mountain side, rapidly advancing across the valley ; she seemed to be going to meet the storm, and suddenly it was as if she had been caught up in it. The sombre vapors enfolded her ; there was a swift, transient, ochereous gleam, then she was seen no more, and the dreary sound of the invisible rain, falling, falling in the beclouded valley, filled all the air.

## XXII.

WHILE hardly a tuft of the broomsedge stirred on the red clay slopes of the hill, the fitful gusts were rioting in the valley, and Teck Jepson, standing in the midst of the tawny growth, absently watched the cloud approaching in the air, and the dead leaves all set a-whirling in devious routes along the brown ground. He heard in the voice of the wind the first bated threatenings of the storm, though but a murmur, full of latent strength, and with a steadily increasing volume that bespoke the prescient elation of the liberated element, free to come and to go as it listed. There were occasionally black boughs — dead, doubtless, brittle, and easily wrenched from the tree, for the wind had not yet stretched its muscle — to be seen thrashing along clumsily for a little way, then falling to the earth, harried up again presently by the boisterous blast, and set a-going anew in their simulated flight.

Suddenly the broomsedge bowed down to the ground; he heard the forest quake; the clouds were closing in, and, with an abrupt realization that the storm was upon him, he caught the small Bob up on his shoulder and ran for home. It was a swift, short dash over the broken ground against the buffeting wind, so uncertain of mood, now rollicking, now fierce. The little mountaineer's gay laughter and shrieks of exhilaration from his lofty perch mingled with its sound, as he clutched Jepson's collar and looked back at the wild rout behind them; the clouds seeming to roll on the ground, and tossed by the turbulent wind; the erratic flight of leaves and sticks; the disheveled woods, all their boughs turning from the blast as if holding out depre-



cating, quivering arms in plea for mercy. Even after they had reached the haven of the porch, they heard once and again a wild aerial hilarity echoing along the deep chasm, in which the river was locked as in the isolation of a lake, and anon a low, menacing roar. But the storm was definitely angry when it fairly burst, and they were housed none to soon. The thunder's peal was augmented to even alien ferocity by the reverberations in the rocky abysses, above the deeply sunken channel of the river; the lightning flashed, tracing sinister characters across the black clouds, fading out before one might read this terrible script; the slopes below and the crags above had disappeared in the multiplicity of the interposing lines of rain; the garden, sere and faded, save for a forlorn prince's feather here and there clinging to the stalk, was gradually effaced from the world, and presently the mists were in the porch, and beginning to sift in at the open door. Jepson rose from before the fire which he had kindled, and shut them out, to stand shivering there, or to press pallid and white against the door, like some forlorn spectral outcasts, forbidden to haunt the place which that human love, which even death cannot kill, makes them fain to tread once more.

The white flames of the pine knots leaped with glad elastic bounds up the chimney; the shadows in the dark corners shifted continuously with the glancing shafts of light. The little house had many tokens of its previous occupants: a spinning-wheel, where now only the spiders drew out long, shining threads, stood in the corner; sundry gowns, all of rich, gay colors, despite their homely material, garnet, or orange, or dark blue, hung on the wall, as if Jepson's mother had just placed them there. Her yarn, in dusty hanks, swung from the rafters, and the quilts she had "pieced," folded somewhat eccentrically, were piled high on the "corner-shelf" which they had burdened of yore. Against the jamb of the chimney, on a slight out-jutting of the clay and sticks, serving as shelf, was a great brown

gourd, half filled with bright-tinted scraps, and buttons, and the bulbs of plants that would never bloom now, but should lie idle and fall to dust, with all the further possibilities of life unfulfilled. In a splint basket at one side of the fire lay a rough coat, worn and torn : her needle had rusted in the patch ; the coarse waxed thread would never be drawn through and her last stitch completed.

It was for these vagaries, the preservation of the tokens of the old home-life, that Mrs. Bowles esteemed Teck Jepson somewhat "teched in the head." Could she have beheld the dust which plentifully covered them all, the sentiment which she contemned would have impressed her as but a distraught trifle in comparison with the rank madness which she would have deemed his system of housekeeping. Bob, however, gazed about with undisturbed serenity, as he stood sturdily on his fat legs in the middle of the floor. Only when he turned about in search of a seat did his countenance fall.

"This air the bes' ez I kin do fur ye, bubby," Jepson remarked, tendering him a full-grown chair. "I hev got no leetle cheers hyar."

But when Bob's plump bulk had scaled the heights of the chair, the soles of his feet reaching but little beyond its verge, and his aspect presenting a singular study of foreshortening as he sat and gazed at the fire, content descended upon him as before, and occasionally he glanced at Jepson with a lively little grin, all his snagged teeth on parade, confident of sympathy in his satisfaction and unaffrighted freedom. But Jepson could not unreservedly share this placidity. As he sat opposite, smoking his pipe, his reflective face lighted by the fire, he observed : "Ye're cornsider'ble of a puzzle, Bob. I dunno what I oughter do with ye. I reckon, ef the truth war knowed, I oughter take ye up the mounting ter yer mam. Likely ez not they air sarchin' fur ye now."

"No-o," returned Bob, with a resolute rising inflection. "I be a-goin' ter live in de Cove! Right hyar!" And

he looked about him with a pleased, adoptive gaze. He had heard Mrs. Bowles bemoan her sad fate in being wrested away from the Cove, but the naturally high opinion of the locality which this fostered was hardly adequate to the reality, in his estimation, as for the first time in his memory he was within its charmed limits, resting in the security of Jepson's coveted companionship.

The big man would not argue so unpleasing a subject with the little man; he still meditatively smoked, heedless of the discursive, juvenile babble, and answering only at random when a direct appeal was made to him. Presently these queries grew fewer; intervals of absolute silence ensued; a drowsy mutter, and Bob succumbed finally to the influences of warmth and quiet, and the fatigue of his long jaunt down the mountain before he had met Jepson in the road. He sat, or rather lay, in the armchair, his flushed round face with its happiness still upon it, as if the sweetness of security, of kindness, of the sense of being held of value, had pervaded his dreams. It would have been long, long, before the faces of Sim and A'minty could have learned those serene curves. But Bob's adaptability had stood him in good stead hitherto, and one need hardly have wished him more retentively sensitive that his little life might have been still more dismal than it was.

The rain fell with dull monotony; only at long intervals a sudden acceleration betokened a down-pour in sheets, and the increased volume of the torrents washed with a heavy splashing from the eaves. The sound was melancholy, full of intimations of the waning year, of the killing frosts to come. Even the thunder, ceasing to roll, left an unwelcome void, having been as an incident to vary the dreary sameness of sounds and suggestions. The lightnings were quenched. The world was given over to the sobbing wind and the sad-voiced rain. Jepson had no cheerful thoughts to beguile the idle hour. His heart was heavy, and the further perspectives of the days gloomed full of

shadows. He did not upbraid himself; he was spared that keenest edge of regret, so complete was his proud sense of rectitude, his unswerving faith in himself and his own motives. Nor did he resent Marcella's anger. He admitted with a deep sigh its justification. He accepted it as a retribution, in some sort, not for his own sins, but for his unintentional contributive share, as he construed it, in the untoward circumstances that had resulted in Eli Strobe's injuries. He rebelled, however, against his faté, this shipwreck of his love, more, indeed, than he was definitely conscious of doing, for he often boasted to himself, in the illusions of his piety that he meekly submitted to the Lord's will, according to the example of the saints; then he would walk the floor all night in mental anguish, or wander forth in the dark, autumnal woods till dawn, in all the throes of despair. Of late, there had often come into his mind a bitterness with the thought of her which it had seldom before known. The image of the young stranger at the forge was continually associated with hers. His jealous eyes had been quick to note the changing expressions on her face, full of fear for Rathburn's sake, when his strange absence had been mentioned. Oddly enough, Jepson was sensible of the glow of anger that the man she loved, if indeed she loved him, should fail in aught of homage; he took no satisfaction in the thought that it was a possibility — nay, a probability — that Rathburn did not love her. He deprecated the pangs she might feel, and still he sighed for his own.

So absorbed was he in these sombre meditations, as he sat, his elbow on the arm of the chair, his chin in his hand, his contemplative eyes upon the fire, that he took no heed of a step on the porch without, although he might have heard it, even through the long-drawn sighing of the wind and the fresh outburst of the tumultuous rain, for no caution restrained its demonstrations. The heavy stamping was obviously designed to free first one boot and then the other from the persistent clinging of the red clay mire. Only

when the door was unceremoniously flung open from without did Jepson rouse himself with a start, and lift his head, seeing at first merely the white mist with the lines of rain all aslant across it, and imposed upon it the figure of a man at the threshold, the wind tossing the loose ends of his garments, and the water streaming from his bent old hat. For a moment his face was invisible, for the dull gray light of the beclouded landscape was behind him; but the draught from the opening door rekindled the coals of the dying fire, and sent the ashes scattering about the hearth, and as the flames flared up they revealed the familiar features of Jake Baintree. Jepson, rising slowly from his chair, experienced the odd doubting sensation that sometimes besets one in a dream, when its vagaries so transcend the probabilities as to rouse a skeptical application of verisimilitude to these airy fantasies. The next moment a definite appreciation of the reality of his visitor asserted itself. Jake Baintree had evidently been drinking heavily. But for that, what he said in response to Jepson's query might have seemed stranger than it did.

"What did ye kem hyar fur?" sternly demanded the master of the house.

His manner evidently affected Baintree, who did not bear himself with the swaggering freedom with which he had flung open the door. He had looked threatening. He was cowed in an instant, — cowed, but very crafty.

"A-beggin'," he said, with a sudden light in his eyes. "I want a hunk o' bread."

Jepson stood uncertain, reluctant, a frown knitting his brow, fairly coerced for once in his life. It was the only plea that could have restrained him from taking the intruder by the shoulders and turning him out of the door, — the only plea, and Baintree knew it. He could not accord his hospitality as ungraciously, perhaps, as he might have desired, and thus he was forced into more of a suave insincerity than had ever before been able to adjust itself to his

face and manner. He turned toward a pine table, pushed aside in one corner, and indicated certain dishes beneath an inverted wooden bowl.

"Thar's all in the house. He'p yerse'f, he'p yerse'f." For his life he could not have hindered the heartiness of the intonation, or the unreserve of the invitation. The habits of a lifetime, the traditions of kith and kin and all the countryside, constrained him. He did not credit for an instant the sincerity of Baintree's demand, but none could ask bread or shelter of him in vain. It was the first time that the unruly and absolute temper had been thus helplessly in the control of circumstances, and he was irked by a sense of feigning, as he turned about and threw a pile of pine knots on the fire,—for had he care for his guest's cheer or warmth?

Baintree had possessed himself of a corn-dodger, and as he sat down before the fire, the rain still trickling from his garments, Jepson read in his thin, clear-cut face, the elation because of the success of his clever ruse. He had not come with the intention to ask for bread,—his manner at first had betokened a far more formidable errand; and as he sat there munching, with a mimetic show of hunger, Jepson was moved to marvel anew what had brought him into the house of a man whom he held his enemy, and who certainly was no friend.

"The fodder gins out wunst in a while up on the mounting," Baintree observed presently, the whiskey that he had drunk imparting to him, despite his reticent habit, its characteristic loquacious glow. He cast a glance of thinly veiled antagonism upon his entertainer. Then he said, with a low chuckle of derision, in which he would hardly have ventured to indulge at a calmer moment, "I s'pose things never git ter sech a pass ez that in this house. Ye mus' hev a bar'l o' meal constant ez never gits empty, no matter how high ye feed, an' a can o' coal-ile ez hain't got no bottom ez ye kin reach. Surely the Lord faviors a man ez

views sech visions o' yourn ez much ez he done 'Lijah." He hesitated for a moment, staring with bloodshot eyes into the fire, then snapped his fingers. "'T war n't 'Lijah!" he exclaimed, with an air of discovery, — "'t war n't 'Lijah! 'T war the widder woman ez hed that mighty desirable brand o' meal an' ile. Now, Teck," with mock persuasive-ness, "ye ain't goin' ter tell me that, survigrous ez ye be, plumb captain o' all Brumsaidge Cove, ye hev let that thar widder woman git ahead o' ye? Whar's yer everlastin' meal an yer eternal coal-ile?"

He turned about, and affected to anxiously survey the culinary stores, scanty enough, arrayed on a hanging shelf suspended from the rafters, and, thus isolated, protected from the rats and the mice.

He enjoyed the immunity from retort or retaliation which men accord to the drunken, and which is incomprehensible to the more intolerant temperament of women. Jepson steadfastly regarded him in silence, and as Baintree turned again to the fire he seemed, in shifting his position, to have forgotten his jeer and the prospective joy with which he had thought to pursue it. A realization of the situation came upon him anew, and he made haste to gnaw at his corn-dodger with an affectation of great hunger.

"I'm mighty glad ter git it," he mumbled.

Jepson had resumed his seat, and, with the white glow of the blazing pine knots irradiating his serious face, he demanded, "Whar's the man ez war bidin' with ye? That corn-dodger ez ye air eatin' ain't goin' ter help him."

"He'll make out. He ain't one o' the lackin' kind," Baintree responded cavalierly.

The heat of the fire perhaps aided the heady effect of his potations, for he was presently more definitely intoxicated than before. Few people had ever seen him thus affected; for though he drank deeply at times, the quantity that would set another man reeling hardly disturbed his equilibrium. The fiery courage distilled from the corn was in his veins now, and showed with a sturdy bravado.

"I'm leavin' the kentry, Teck," he exclaimed suddenly. "I'm leavin' this hyar twisted an' turmoiled e-end o' the world ye call the mountings. I hope never ter see a mound o' groun' agin higher 'n this hat. I fund out what pore shakes the mountings air jes' through goin ter — ter" — his voice faltered; his eyes were fixed intently on the empty space before them, as if he beheld something there invisible to others; he made a *détour* around the word "jail," and went on with an air of triumphant inspiration in this obvious device — "through *visitin'* a sure-enough town. An' I never want ter see a mound o' groun' more 'n two inches high agin — 'thout it air yer grave."

He paused abruptly, turning his bloodshot eyes instantly upon Jepson to observe the effect of his words.

The acrid tone, the bitter hatred in his face, made a strong impression upon the man who had inspired them, now that he was constrained to be still and observe the demonstrations, which, for sheer humanity's sake, he could not resent. He looked down meditatively into the fire. It was odd to him to think of his grave, — some scant measure of earth surely waiting for him somewhere, on which the weeds had grown apace this summer, and even now the autumn rains beat unrelenting, as the herbage would thrive and the torrents fall when he should lie unheeding below, — strange to think of these things, with the robust pulses a-throb in his blood.

"When ye see it," he said, with the steady courage and calm strength which seemed to him, half consciously measuring their power, an expression of piety and spiritual grace and Christian resignation, "ef ever ye do, remember the man it kivers war mighty willin' ter lie down thar whenst summoned."

Baintree winced. Even when intoxicated he had not the faith in himself to vie with this hardihood. He resorted to recrimination, for still the whiskey made him bold.

"Ye ain't goin' ter be so powerful comfortable thar. Ye



ain't goin' ter rest so easy in yer grave. The devil ain't goin' ter let ye alone. Ye 'll hev ter answer in the nex' worl' fur all ye hev done ter me in this. Ye 'll answer, — ye mark my words."

Tears of maudlin grief stood in his eyes. Despite their source, Jepson melted to them in some sort.

"I'm willin'. I hain't shirked none in this worl'. I reckon I ain't goin' ter ketch the complaint of shirkin' in the nex'. I'll answer. What ye want me ter answer fur?"

"Fur my soul," said Baintree solemnly. "I'd hev saved my soul alive ef — ef ye hed n't kem a-interferin' 'twixt me an' pa'son, and kep' me from washin' my sins away."

Jepson seemed to take meditative account of the charge.

"I done accordin' ter my conscience, ez the voice o' the Lord 'peared ter lead. Ye hed no right in the fold, an' arter I fund Sam'l Keale's hat an' coat I could not hold my peace. Jestice hed overlooked ye, but I spoke the word; not in malice, ef I know myse'f, — not in malice. But ef I hev done wrong," he went on, knitting his brows and gazing into the fire, his arms folded across his breast, "I pray the Lord will visit it on me. I pray he'll do sech unto me, an' mo'."

Baintree was stricken mute for a moment, vaguely impressed by his companion's look and manner. Then his attention was concentrated anew upon his own grievance.

"That ain't goin' ter do *me* no good" — he began.

"An' no harm," said Jepson. "Nuthin' kin hurt ye 'ceptin' what ye do yerse'f."

Baintree looked with dark suspicion over his shoulder.

"What ails ye ter say that?" he demanded surlily.

Jepson did not reply directly.

"Ef a man air persecuted, an' air innercent o' crime, his persecutors air jes' harryin' tharselves ter hell. An' that's the long an' the short o' it. Ef ye hev done no crime, sech steps ez I tuk agin ye hev hurt me, not you-uns, an' I'll hev ter take 'em back'ards in hell."

There was no arguing with a faith so very complete, so strongly grounded, as this.

Baintree said nothing for a time. Then he suddenly broke out as if the words were wrenched from him by some physical anguish which he could not resist : —

“ I never hed no han’ in Keale’s takin’-off, but I mought ez well, — oh, my Lord, I mought ez well ! ”

He clasped his hands and wrung them hard, the poor subterfuge of the corn-dodger falling unheeded on the floor.

The shrill tones did not rouse the plump Bob, still asleep in the chair at one side of the fire, but he was vaguely conscious of them, and stirred uneasily, and again relapsed into motionless slumber.

“ Look hyar ! ” exclaimed Jepson, agitated and excited. “ Don’t kem hyar an’ tell me yer crimes over my own h’a’th-stone an’ a-eatin’ of my bread, fur I ’ll use ’em agin ye. I ’ll turn the sword on ye. I ain’t yer frien’, man. I never war.”

“ Ye war the t’other night at the forge.” Baintree had hastily recovered himself. He spoke in his natural voice, a trifle more unctuous, perhaps, with its coaxing intonation. He even stooped down and picked up the bit of bread, carefully dusting the ashes from it as he turned it from side to side. “ Ye war the t’other night, whenst — whenst my partner seen ye at the forge. Ye kep’ them men off’n us.”

“ An’ ye ’low I done sech ez that fur you-uns, or him either, ye fool ? ” Jepson had risen. He had thrust his hand into his leather belt and was looking down upon Baintree with scornful irritation. “ I done it fur right an’ jestic ! I see no harm in yer sarchin’ fur silver ; an’ though ’t war n’t right ter work on the sly in the forge, it air a leetle matter, not wuth harmin’ a man for. ’Twar kase I fund no harm — no harm, ’cordin’ ter my light — in them actions. These Brumsaidge critters ” — he broke off abruptly, addressing himself instead of Baintree, and speaking of Broomsedge as if he had a wide experience of men and life elsewhere, when he knew scarcely any creature beyond its limits — “ these Brumsaidge critters can’t sense right an’ jestic, nor nuthin’ done fur jestic’s sake. That’s jes’ what them men

at the barn 'lowed, — *frien's ter the two, the stranger an' Baintree!* But I tell ye," — he turned suddenly upon the man sitting by the hearth, — "I ain't yer frien', nor," he added, with stronger emphasis, "*his frien', nuther.*"

Baintree's face had lightened; his eyes glittered. It was a forlorn thing that a man should have cause to rejoice at his enemy's misfortune in being suspected of becoming his friend.

Jepson had not resumed his chair. He still stood on the hearth, one hand in his leather belt, which supported his hunting-knife, of which he had not yet divested himself, the other on the high mantelpiece. He looked down with scowling impatience at Baintree, evidently eager to be rid of him, and presently he addressed himself to accomplish this end without too flagrant a breach of the hospitality which he held dear.

He had offered him something else to eat, and when this had been declined he demanded suddenly, "What ailed ye, ter kem hyar this evenin'? Ye know ye war n't in no wise hongry."

"I war drunk. That air the only reason I know," said Baintree gloomily. He was becoming in some sort sober now, and was strangely quiet, with a deep despondency of manner.

"Air ye leavin' the kentry fur true?" queried Jepson.

Baintree looked up craftily.

"Naw!" he exclaimed contemptuously, as if the suggestion had been broached by another than himself. "Whar would I go — an' who would I go to — an' what would I do thar? Naw! I'm goin' ter stay hyar ter be treated like a dog, ez I always war. I hed a man ter kem nigh chokin' me, not long ago" — he bared his throat to show his bruises — "look-a-hyar, — an' he 'd hev 'lowed ez I war crazy ef I hed lifted a hand agin *him.*"

Jepson was silent, still meditating the feasibility of ridding himself of his unwelcome guest without violence to the canons of hospitality.

He had hardly noticed when the rain ceased its tumultuous beat on the roof; a fresh relay of winds was speeding down and down the valley; he heard, but absently, the snorting and champing of these aerial chargers as they swept by at a tremendous pace; the clouds were fain to race with them, for presently he saw upon the wet floor of the room, where the rain had splashed in under the door, the reflection of the yellow glare of the unveiled sky throwing its light upon the brown walls, and, albeit faintly, even to the dusky rafters. Jepson strode to the door and flung it open. As he stood with his back toward Baintree, he had one of those sudden premonitions, so conclusive, yet so illogical, that fall upon us sometimes with the cogent force of truth and an unaccountable extension of merely human mental vision. He turned abruptly and saw its confirmation in the lowering look of hatred that Baintree had bent upon him. As if in some sort conscious of self-betrayal, Baintree rose with a casual air and an incidental, empty glance, and followed to the door, where he lounged upon the porch, his hands in his pockets, aimlessly surveying the landscape. Yet Jepson knew now, as well as if Baintree had confessed it, that he had come there, with the courage of the "corn-juice" inflaming his blood, with some wild drunken scheme of violence and vengeance, which the presence or the words of his intended victim had somehow cowed and crushed. They were silent as they contemplated the great flaring west, all a splendid burnished golden glow, above the darkly purple mountain opposite, its summit imposed with a definite detail, in which every tufted, plummy pine top was distinct, upon the vivid yellow emblazonment. About the slopes white mists were slowly creeping, and down in the chasm the waters of the river, with all the graces of reflection, ran in molten golden currents. Clouds were yet in the sky, but now and again the colors of the iris flashed out, with a swift elasticity as of a bow that is bent, and hovered above the valleys. The drops still fell slowly from

the eaves of the house, and the flooring of the porch was sodden and sleek with the rain; in the hollow of a warped plank the water stood still as in a bowl, reflecting the clapboards above, and an empty nest in a niche between the roof and the post of the porch. All the colors of wood and hill were clarified and heightened; the sere grasses, beaten down though they were, wore their brown and straw and amber tints more jauntily; the boles of the trees were black, and somehow the distances seemed clear and brought near. Jepson had not thought he could have seen so definitely, so far away, the figure of a man slowly strolling along the red clay road, — of a richer and deeper color it was, sodden with the rain. The presence of the figure intimated that the storm had subsided less recently than he had thought; the weight of the down-pour had beaten the ground hard, and had added but little to the mud here and there in deep, tough masses in the centre of the road.

He made no move to turn back into the house, yet Baintree lingered, as if his mission were but half accomplished. It is difficult to conceive of a more indelible expression of gloom than had fixed upon his face. It indicated a misery and hopelessness past all human help, past all human endurance. Jepson spoke suddenly upon an impulse which he hardly understood.

“Enny time ye feel ez ef the devil war arter ye, Jake, ef ye ’ll kem hyar ter me, I ’ll holp stave him off,” he said. He hesitated for a moment, for Baintree’s bright, rat-like, furtive eye was glancing up at him, informed by a spirit so alien to that which animated his words that it almost silenced them. “I hev been agin ye,” he went on presently; “ye know I hev. I always b’lieved mos’ faithful ez ye killed Sam’l Keale. But the jury say ye didn’t, an’ the kentry hev abided by the verdic’. An’ ef ye order yer walk aright an’ do no mo’ harm, I ’ll stan’ by ye an’ won’t see ye persecuted, — though I ain’t yer frien’, an’ I never will be.”

Baintree’s expression had shifted more than once during

this speech : it had softened, had become wistful, pathetic, but it hardened suddenly, as the last words fell on the air.

"An' who air ter be the jedge o' what's harm, an' what ain't?" he asked with a sneer.

"I am," said Jepson, with his unswerving faith in his own methods. "I dunno no way ter jedge o' right an' wrong 'cept by the light ez kems from within."

"An' ye air the only one it's shed on, eh?" demanded Baintree, still bitterly sneering.

"Ye hev got good reason ter think so. The light lately shed on other folks, 'bout'n you-uns an' yer pardner, would be a mighty scorchin' light, sartain," Jepson retorted significantly.

Baintree understood him to allude to the wrangling differences with the vigilantes in the barn. A prudential afterthought roused his suavity.

"Waal," he observed, after a pause, "I never 'lowed ye war my frien'. I'll say one thing fur ye, — thar ain't no room fur mistakes ez ter whar ye stand. But I be toler'ble glad ez ye hev a mind ter keep them painters an' wild wolves off'n my track. Will ye gimme yer han' on it?"

He held out his own, bent on confirming the promise, as far as he might.

Once more a pang of pity stirred Jepson's heart, albeit he looked down with a certain repulsion upon the long, trembling fingers awaiting his own. "'Cordin' ter the conditions, — ef ye do no mo' harm in my jedgmint." And his strong, warm clasp closed upon Baintree's cold, nerveless hand for an instant, in sanction of the promise.

The touch of that cold, nerveless hand remained strangely within Jepson's palm after the two had separated, for Baintree's perverse reluctance to be off had evaporated, somehow, in the open air, and he slouched out of the inclosure, taking his way, strangely enough, Jepson thought, down to the banks of the river, instead of up the mountain to his lair there, which he could hardly hope to reach, as it was, before

the night should enfold him. Jepson stood aimlessly watching him, feeling the touch of his hand still cold and clammy within his own. Even after the rock and the laurel of the steep slope had interposed, and he saw him no more, he still motionlessly gazed at the spot where he had disappeared, a sense of discontent with himself to which he was a stranger, an irritated, angry regret for he hardly knew what in the interview, pervading all his consciousness.

"I lack the sperit," he said suddenly. "I need ter be made strong. I gits sorry fur that wuthless trash, ez be held tergether ter look like a man, a-purpose, I reckon, for the devil ter beguile me. I gits ter feelin' sorry an' pitiful ter him. An' I knowed that man would hev stabbed me ef he could 'thout harmin' hisse'f, — I knowed it whenst I turned my back, — an' stidder speakin' out what war revealed ter me, an' taxin him with the crime he would hev done, I gin him bread, an' promised ter purtec' him, an' shuk han's on it, ef he would walk right afore the law hyar-after. What ails *me* ter keer? I need strengthenin', — strengthenin' from above."

Despite his absorption he was moved to note, presently, with a pervasive sense of pleasure, how fresh, how soft, the air was. As he looked about, he noticed again the man whom he had observed some time ago walking along the red clay road. A slow pedestrian, certainly; it was almost inconceivable that he had been walking at all, since his progress had carried him so short a distance. Jepson gazed at him with curiosity. He might have recognized him, the light was so clear, had not the man at that moment drawn his broad hat far down over his brow, and then he turned about and began to retrace his way.

Before he was out of sight the incident had passed from Jepson's mind. The freshness of the air was alluring, revivifying. He hesitated as he glanced over his shoulder at the recumbent Bob, asleep in the chair before the smouldering fire; then, without his hat, he strolled down the path, leaving the door open behind him.

He paused in the weed-tangled garden, with its bent and beaten growths forlorn for the desertion of the summer, the sport of the ruder season, and, standing with his elbow on the topmost rail of the fence, looked meditatively at the golden glammers of the rock-bound river. He had not intended to go farther, and presently he turned; he came to a sudden halt, and gazed with keen, narrowing eyes up the slope of the hill.

The man whom he had seen walking along the red clay road was long ago gone, — a tall man and slight, as he remembered the figure, all unlike the one whom he now saw threading his way slowly among the bowlders on the steep incline above the cabin. As the pedestrian emerged presently upon a comparatively open space, Jepson noted a certain burly dignity in his carriage, which even at the distance served to identify him.

Jepson started forward; then paused. He had not spoken to Eli Strobe since the day of the election, when they had conferred together in the interests of the constable's candidacy, and his heart had beat with an intense partisan anxiety for Marcella's sake. He began to appreciate definitely how much he had felt since then of love, and hope, and despair; how hard they had all gone with him. He was ill-suited to relinquishment. His domineering, intolerant spirit had been scantily acquainted with denial. "I'm goin' ter die powerful hard," he said in gloomy forecast. It seemed to him that he had felt already prescient pangs. As his eyes followed Strobe's progress, he protested inwardly against a sort of humiliation to realize that he scarcely cared to accost him, and hear from him the reproaches so cruel on his daughter's lips. Jepson had not a keen self-discernment, but he knew his imperious entity too well to believe himself capable of receiving these bitter words from others with a like patience and acquiescence. That the injury to Eli Strobe was an accident, through no fault of his, was instantly formulated in his consciousness with the vividness



of a retort, as he forecast the constable's upbraidings. Still he hesitated. Suddenly, with a new thought, he started up the slope. He had hardly credited hitherto the report of Eli Strobe's insanity, and he knew nothing of the character of his delusion. Could it be that some fantastic vagary was luring him on amidst the bowlders, and the crags, and the mists of the dusk? Jepson had it in his mind to do a service. He suspected that Strobe had escaped from the careful guards of the fireside circle. As he approached, climbing among the crags, he wondered that he had not yet been observed, yet he forbore to hail his old friend. With the knowledge of the failure of his mental faculties was the vague, unreasoning impression of the impairment of the senses. He felt as if Eli Strobe might not hear his ringing halloo.

Thus it was that, as the earth grew darker and yet more shadowy, though still the sky flared above, albeit dulling from its burning golden hue to a deep copper tint with horizontal bars of red, while the river ran blood, Eli Strobe, turning a curve in the road about the base of a cliff, came abruptly upon Jepson standing in an open space, motionless, expectant, silent, bareheaded. The lurid flare of the skies flung its unnatural light upon Jepson's face. He winced as he had never thought to do, for the doughty constable turned suddenly half round, and held up a quivering arm before his eyes, as if to shut out the sight or to ward off a blow.

Jepson spoke instantly, hurt and angry :—

"Ye hev got no call ter treat me that-a-way, Eli. Ye hev never hed no call ter be afeard o' me."

The constable had forgotten his threat of serving papers on "a harnt." He trembled violently. He could hardly stand. He tottered to a bowlder near by, and sat down. As he hesitatingly looked up at Jepson and cast his eyes down once more, there was visible in his expression a surprise that his old friend should still be standing there.

"I hev always wished ye well," Jepson declared, with a swelling heart.

"Thanky, sir, thanky kindly," said Eli Strobe, with a faltering tongue and uncharacteristic humility.

Jepson detected something in the tone which he did not understand. He cast a sharp glance at his interlocutor as he demanded, "Don't ye know me?" fearing that Strobe's mental derangement included a failure of recognition of familiar things and faces.

"Oh, mighty well, mighty well indeed," the constable hastened to assure him.

There was a momentary silence. Jepson hardly comprehended the restraint which irked him. Whatever of pain he had anticipated in the interview, he had never expected aught like this. He noticed that Strobe more than once cast his eyes down the long winding curves of the red clay road, stretching so far under the metallic lustre of that darkly yellow sky. The constable was, however, too heavy a man to attempt flight, too far spent by the agitation that rent his breath and heaved in his broad chest. His judgment was still very excellent, and he adjusted himself anew on the boulder.

"Ef I ain't wanted," said Jepson, with a flare of his wonted arrogant spirit, "say the word, an' I'll make myse'f sca'ce. I jes' 'lowed, though, ez mebbe ye mought hev a mind fur a few words, bein' ez ye an' me war always frien'ly tergether. But I ain't one ter want ter bide whar I hev no place."

Eli Strobe's face could hardly have expressed more definitely than it did his relief at this intimation that the termination of the interview was subject to his wishes. He was, however, bent on insuring this if civility might suffice. In all his political experience he had never shown more suavity than now, when he said, with tremulous haste, —

"I'm obligated by yer comp'ny, sir." Then he added, in a more natural tone, "I hev been wonderin' a heap 'bout'n ye lately, — I hev been studyin' 'bout'n ye mighty nigh all the time."

"Nobody hev tole me that," said Jepson, wondering to find him so friendly, and still struggling with that vague, indiscriminated restraint that hampered the conversation.

"I reckon nobody else hev viewed ye," Eli Strobe said quickly, not without a certain anxiety. Ambition was an elastic passion in his breast. He was already piquing himself upon his unique opportunity, forgetting Rathburn's experience.

Jepson keenly felt the obvious fact that Marcella never mentioned him at home. But it was only another pang, and he said doggedly to himself that he knew so many pangs, another might hardly matter. He did not answer directly. He said presently, —

"What war ye a-wonderin' 'bout?"

"Ef — ef" — said Eli Strobe, a keen curiosity glancing out from under the brim of his hat, contending with a fear of giving offense — "ef ye ever 'sociate now with them folks ye useter be so tuk up with, G'liath, an' David, an' Sol'mon, an' them."

Jepson hesitated.

"I would n't call it 'sociatin'" — he paused — "not ed-zac'ly."

"They be sorter stuck up, eh?" said Eli Strobe, with a grin of relish. "I never did b'lieve ez worldly pride dies out 'fore ye git ter the nex' worl'. It's the main part o' some folks. It's all the soul they hev got, thar pride, — the rest is body."

Jepson, dazed somewhat by the queer turn the conversation had taken, stood silent, till he was suddenly interrogated anew.

"Do ye set ez much store on Sol'mon ez ye useter?"

"I hev hed no call ter change my mind," Jepson replied wonderingly, for the eagerness of Strobe's interest in gossiping of these antique worthies was very fresh and immediate.

"Smart man?" Strobe nodded his own head as he asked the question, willing to be convinced.

"That ain't the word fur it," said Jepson, the fascination of the subject reasserting itself even in this stress of anxiety, "I hev been studyin' a heap lately 'bout the house he built" —

"Thar, now, what did I tell ye 'bout pride?" Eli Strobe broke in. "I'll be bound Sol'mon kerried the mem'ry o' that thar house o' his'n plumb ter the house not built with hands; an' he ain't the fust ez clings ter worldly deeds, an' I'll be bound he won't be the las'." He paused, with a sudden look of consciousness on his face. The parallel was too patent to escape the notice of so clever a man, ignorant though he was. He was realizing that the important pride incident to the office of constable of Broomsedge Cove was hardly meet equipment to bear to the golden shores. But he was sturdily hopeful. "I'll cure myself o' that 'fore I land on the further side o' Jordan," he muttered to himself with a chuckle, for the humorous suggestions of the prospect did not altogether escape him. "I ain't goin' ter cut no comical figger 'mongst the saints through pride o' bein' constable o' Brumsaidge. Naw, sir! Pa'son an' me hev got ter winnow me o' that sure."

The parson might have esteemed it a more difficult task, but Eli Strobe, with a cheerfulness predicated on the possibility of securing a spiritual mind in good season for spiritual needs, began to expand into more personal curiosity; for Goliath and Solomon were, after all, far-away subjects to his contemplation. Politics, perhaps, had rendered him suspicious, and he had become inured to doubting on principle a man's claims for himself. He cast his old distrustful side-long glance at Jepson, freighted with a wish to say more than he dared, — to elicit protestations by insinuating that his friend had not been so placed in the other world as to know whether Solomon was as "smart" as he had been proclaimed to be, or to associate with the best of the Biblical worthies.

"Do ye like yer new abidin' place ez well ez yer old?" Strobe demanded.

"A hundred times better," declared Jepson. "I 'lowed at fust I could n't bide thar" — Strobe pricked up his gossip-loving ears — "through so many old thoughts o' old times. But I be useter 'em agin now, an' they don't hender me none."

Again there was silence. A star was shining in the yellow west beside a flake of purple cloud. Mists shivered about the crags. High amongst them a screech-owl shrilled.

"I wisht ye 'd kem an' spen' the night" — Jepson began; he paused abruptly, for Eli Strobe had sprung to his feet, with a white face, in which fear and resolution were oddly blended; he was wrestling with a frightful old superstition of the lures of a ghost to lead to hell; if he should follow the spectre for a step, he fancied himself lost — "or," added Jepson, "bide ter supper."

"Naw, naw!" Eli Strobe declined promptly. Then remembering his sedulous civility, he continued: "They 'll be waitin' fur me at home, — an' mam an' Marcelly air powerful partic'lar. I 'll meet up with ye agin somewhar, I reckon. Good-night."

Jepson stood in puzzled doubt, as the constable took his way with athletic swiftness down the homeward path. More than once Strobe looked backward, to see the motionless figure standing bareheaded amongst the crags and the shifting mists, and turned instantly and walked on more swiftly than before.

He was out of breath, and pale and chilly, when he reached home. Marcella and Isabel were awaiting him in the passage between the two rooms, and while the younger daughter ran in to announce his return to Mrs. Strobe, Marcella came down the steps to meet him.

"Whar hev ye been, dad, so late?" she asked.

"Marcelly," he said in a mysterious, low tone, as they stood together on the porch, beneath the skeleton vines that flapped drearily in the wind, "I dunno what got inter me this evenin'. I tuk ter misdoubtin' ef — ef Teck Jepson

ever war kilt ” — her heart gave a great joyous bound — “ ef he ever war dead. An’ I started out ter go ter that leetle graveyard o’ his folks whar ye tole me he war buried,” — she convulsively clutched his arm, — “ ter see fur myse’f ef thar war enny new grave thar.”

“ An’ — an’ — what did ye find ? ” she cried, elated.

He stared down at her in the closing dusk, bewildered by her voice and manner. His tones were more huskily mysterious still. “ I never got thar — fur I met his harnt ” — She gave a sharp exclamation, and then caught one hand to her lips, as if to restrain the scream that might otherwise escape.

“ Tell on,” she said.

“ Waal, I hed some words with the harnt ; an’ ’t war comical how much ’t war like Teck, a-settin’ up ter ’sociate with Sol’mon an’ them, whenst from some words he let drap I know he war in the t’other place. I know Teck. He could hev been mighty interestin’ this evenin’, ef he would. He tried ter git me ter foller him, but I war too smart fur him, — tellin’ me how proud Sol’mon air o’ the house he built.”

“ Dad,” the girl gasped, mindful of the impending inquisition of lunacy, “ I ain’t axed ye fur nuthin’ fur a good while. Promise me one thing.”

“ Waal, Marcelly ? ” he replied expectantly, but cautious.

“ Promise me ye won’t tell nobody ’bout yer seein’ the harnt.”

His countenance fell. It was a sensation to retail, to make him the joyful cynosure of all the gossips, when he should be once more able to join his cronies at the forge or the store. But her pleading eyes were on his face ; his paternal heart stirred, and his affection could compass even such self-denial.

“ Waal, Marcelly, I promise — though ” —

She would not wait for argument. “ An’, dad, ef enny-

body axes ye how ye know Teck Jepson air dead, say yer darter Marcelly tole ye whar he war buried."

"Yes," he interrupted, with his burly bass chuckle, "an' I'll say I 'lowed they would n't hev buried him 'thout he war dead."

The white light of the newly kindled tallow dip within the room streamed out amongst the dusky brown shadows, and he went cheerfully in to his supper.

### XXIII.

THE roistering blades who had been wont to congregate at the forge had resumed that cheerful habit, for the more recent excitements touching the discovery of the identity of the mysterious smith, who busied himself about the anvil in the dead hour of the night, had quite crowded out all recollection of the previous sensation of the parson's visions. Few, perhaps none but he himself, thought of the apparition that, accoutred with hoofs and equipped with wings "bat-wise," had sat upon the anvil, while the ghastly simulacrum of one of the jolly group had held the shutter ajar to look in upon his unconscious rollicking mortal self ; although often enough the sound of the uncouth hilarity, the scraping of the old fiddle, or the wild, barbaric choruses rang out in the solemn silence of the stricken woods, and acquainted the Settlement with the fact that the "boys were caperin' like all possessed down thar at the forge." The parson sighed, for all the ascetic convictions of his nature were wounded by the unthinking jocosity and revelry, the very laughter of which he, in his portentous gravity of creed, esteemed a sin. But even parsons can learn, and the good old man beheld no more visions thenceforward to the day of his death. Allegory and metaphor had departed, with all their attendant graces of rhetoric, from his discourse, and thereafter he urged upon his congregation the necessity of truth and the insidiousness of lying, until the subject seemed to grow personal, and each member ransacked the possibilities for the means whereby the pastor could have become acquainted with sundry individual feats of athletically drawing the long-bow.



The fluctuating shafts of red light, now flung across the landscape without, now suddenly withdrawn, as the breath of the bellows rose and fell, imparted a genial element to the gaunt and sere autumnal scene this afternoon, as Bassett approached the little low building under the beetling crags. The dusk had already fallen, the metallic lustre had tarnished in the sky, and only here and there a dimly burnished gleam gave evidences of how the sunset but now had flared. The depressing influences of the rain which its brilliancy had served to obliterate were reasserted in the closing night. Drops were ever and anon fitfully falling in the woods from their lodgment in the sere curled leaves, still clinging to the trees, as the wind stirred them. The mountains, dark and sinister, closed about the Cove, its spaces all narrowing in the hovering obscurity, only indicated, indeed, by the pallid stretches of crab-grass in the place of the harvested crops, and the tawny growth of the broomsedge, the curse of the abandoned land; for the last glimmers of the day revealed these lighter tones in the dull neutrality of the blending darkness. The dank breath of their sodden fibres came to him as he walked; the river called aloud in a tumult of elation, as it dashed bold and wild over the rocks, reinforced by its tributaries from the ranges; exhalations were rising from the ground, loitering in low places, and as the light flared out all red from the forge now and again, it cleft them in twain. The echoes waked still, despite the somnolent, night-shrouded aspect of mountain and valley, and were full of mirth, with snatches of lilting song, to repeat and con anew, till languorously, and syllable by syllable, they dropped to silence, or were overpowered by fresh outbursts of boisterous fun. It might have seemed, even to these accurate mimics, all as it was in the old days before Rathburn had ever come to the Great Smoky to search in chasm and gorge and cave for silver,—before they had been roused in the mystic midnight hour to keep a tally with the strokes of his hammer on the anvil, and repeat

with bated breath his low-toned words, — all as it was. It did not seem thus to Bassett, coming nearer still. A pre-occupation, a lack of zest in the jocularity, in the rallying sallies, he could detect in the very voices of the familiar group too distant to be articulate; and yet they were as bluffly loud as ever. Nevertheless, as he came in view of the interior, the figures of the young mountaineers, now distinct in the glow of the forge fire, now dull and almost indistinguishable in the shadow of the dusky brown walls, intimated but small thought save of the mirth of the moment. The violin's tones were facetious under the bowing of so jovial a hand as Jube, the parson's son, made shift to wield. The severe ascetic lines of his father's profile were queerly imposed upon the rich red tint of the instrument, convulsed by a grin of a magnitude justified only by the phenomenal capers of the dancer, and distorted presently in sympathy with some very intricate harmonies, the production of which were somewhat beyond the performer's capacity. The dancer was Andy Longwood, and his latent agility was manifested to an extent which one would hardly have suspected from his habitual slow, slouching gait. He held either hand upon his hips; his chin was uplifted; he looked not at his feet, surprising as were their deft gyrations to the circle of men who, with their pipes in their mouths, stood about and gazed at him with an expression of slow and lenient amusement, but at the dark and cobwebbed rafters of the high-peaked roof. The white light flared out from the fire for one moment upon his face, with his long fair hair shaken back and tossing with his movements; and as the dull red glow succeeded it, the surrounding spectators fell back laughing, their applause of an intricate double shuffle, with which he had concluded, audible to Bassett as he approached. When he reached the door and stood leaning against it their comments had not yet shifted from the subject.

“Andy, ye air spry fur true! — how did ye l’arn ter take them s’prisin’ steps?” observed Moses Hull, at whom

Bassett glanced in surprise, for it was Hull's ambition to do many things in the nature of feats of agility preëminently well, and commendation from him, therefore, usually was slack and scanty. "Shucks!" He made one or two teetering movements forward on the tips of his toes, then desisted with a debonair wave of his hand. "*I can't, — gin it up.*"

"Gin Andy su'thin' ter drink; 'bleeged ter be dry arter all that hoppin' an' commotion," said Dake, in a tone the essence of suavity. "Hey, Clem?" He appealed to the hospitalities of the blacksmith, who sat upon the anvil, all unmindful of the devil, and smoked his pipe, as he overlooked a game of cards which two young fellows were playing upon the head of a barrel.

"Let him gin hisse'f suthin' ter drink," said Clem, cavalierly, emitting a blue wreath of smoke from his lips. He had not forgiven the youthful rival his unintentionally misleading statement as to Marcella's preference. "I reckon Andy hev got sense enough ter know the outside o' a jug whenst he see it; ef not, let him go dry."

He inserted his pipe once more between his lips, and bent his attention upon the game, solemnly and warily played by the light of the forge fire, the bellows accommodately worked by a youth who fancied he had a bent toward the smith's vocation, and was happy to be allowed to meddle in any capacity with the paraphernalia of the forge.

"I won't die o' thirst, I reckon, yit awhile," panted Andy, who, still out of breath, was walking himself about after the manner in which a horse is exercised after running. He took his way behind the elevated hearth of the forge, for in the dusky retirement of this nook stood a modestly disposed brown jug, with a corn-cob stopper. Its presence here was well-known, and the affectation of secrecy sprang, doubtless, from some mere sentiment of appropriateness, for the liquor was illegally distilled, and came few suspected whence.

Bassett watched the dumb show, very dim in the corner,

of the shadow of a man drinking from the shadow of a jug; he was of an outspoken temperament, of which, however, censoriousness was more an element than candor.

"What ails ye, Gid, ter be a-coddlin' Andy so special?" He did not desist because of a significant glance from Dake, standing in the rear of the anvil. "An' what's Andy a-doin' of over hyar, so fur from home, ennyhows? His folks will 'low he be los', — his mam will be out'n her head," he sneered.

The bibulous shadow paused, with the jug at its lips. The pantomime was very expressive of scornful retort, as Longwood wagged his head silently, but with the fiery fluid in his throat he could not speak for a moment. "I'll knock ye inter Kingdon Come, Joe Bassett, ef ye fool along o' me. Talkin' ez ef I war about five year old! I ain't axin' you-uns 'bout sech ez I do, nohow." And once more he applied his lips to the jug.

"Old or young, Andy hev been mighty important ter Brumsaidge," said Hull seductively. "Some things we-uns would never hev knowed ef 't war n't fur him."

Bassett stared in surprise; then gave a short, scornful laugh. "Waal, I feel powerful sorry fur Brumsaidge ef Andy kin tell 'em ennything!" he flouted.

The young fellow had come from behind the elevated hearth of the forge, wiping his lips on the back of his hand. He had suddenly grown conscious, and looked a trifle crest-fallen. "Waal, I dunno ez I oughter hev tole what I done, — I hev been sorry fur it sence. It jes' sorter slipped out'n my mouth 'fore I knowed it. I hed drunk cornsider'ble apple-jack," — he made this admission with a callow pride in being thus overtaken, — "an' I sca'cely knowed what I said. I war sorry arterward."

"'Bout what?" demanded Bassett, choosing to disregard the telegraphic glances of Hull and Dake.

"Shucks!" said Hull, answering for Longwood, "jes' 'bout tellin' ez Eli Strobe hed gone deranged."

Bassett said nothing, and Longwood, standing with his hands in his pockets, his head bare, — for he had not replaced his hat after dancing, and it now lay among the spokes of a broken wagon-wheel at one side of the shop, — gazed absently down at the game of cards.

“I dunno why ye air sorry ye tole,” said Hull craftily; and it occurred suddenly to Bassett that he was a half-brother of the defeated candidate for constable, and that Longwood was in the process of being cleverly manipulated. “Brumsaidge would hev been obleeged ter find it out, sooner or later. I s’pose,” he added, after a pause, “ye war ’feared they would try ter take his office ’way from him?”

“Edzac’ly!” said Longwood, lifting his large eyes, “an’ I did n’t want ter hev no part nor passel in sech.”

“Waal, ye won’t!” exclaimed Hull reassuringly. He was a dark-browed fellow, of a wooden-like countenance; it seemed specially devoid of expression as he chewed hard upon his quid of tobacco, and he had a casual manner as he continued: “Folks would hev been bound ter hear it n’ised abroad ’fore long, an’ then, ef he air crazy, Brumsaidge can’t keep him constable. This air a mighty big deestric’, an’ arter ye wunst gits out’n the Settlemint houses air few fur true, an’ fur apart, an’ woods air thick. A crazy constable ain’t no constable at all.”

“Yes, sir!” Dake broke in; “an’ folks out thar hev got ter hev some sort’n purtection besides a gyard-dog, — got ter sorter depend on the law, now’days. We-uns ain’t got grit enough ter take keer o’ ourselves, like we useter do.”

But this last sentiment boded a digression. Hull hastily interposed, still incidentally, however: “’T ain’t yer fault, Andy, ef he war ter lose his office, — ye did n’t make him go deranged; an’ it stands ter reason ez the law can’t be administered by a off’cer teched in the head. Naw, sir! But then he mought not be crazy. What did he say, Andy, ter make ye ’low he had gone deranged?”

The question was asked, and Hull gazed intently at the young fellow, fearing that at this significant moment some word, some movement, of the others might rob him of what he so zealously sought, — a clew for the guidance of those who were scheming in the matter of the inquisition of lunacy; for so close had been the race for constable that in the event of the office becoming vacant, and a consequent special election, Joshua Nevins could hardly fail to have a walk-over, as against any other candidate than the disabled incumbent. Nevertheless, although Hull's face had grown conscious, his manner carefully dissembled his interest, and Longwood's glance discovered naught to inflame his anger or rouse his caution. It was only because of the twinge of his own conscience that he declared irritably, lifting his voice, "I dunno what he said, — leastwise I hev no call ter tell, an' I ain't a-goin' ter." A sudden doubt, even suspicion, stirred within him. "Somebody else war axin' me that question jes' ter-day."

Hull, fresh at politics, lost his self-possession. "'T war n't me!" he protested, as if repudiating an accusation.

"Did I say 't war?" demanded Longwood, with a snarling accent. The whiskey which he had drunk and that goading sense of wrong-doing had blended in angry discomfort, which he was more disposed to wreak on others, if he might with impunity, than to suffer in silence.

"Don't quar'l, boys," eagerly objected Jube. His habit was not that of a peacemaker, but the prospect of a wrangle threatened to despoil the pleasure he experienced in twanging the old violin, for the loud voices overbore the vibrations of the strings as he experimented with some delicate flecking touches of the bow. "Don't quar'l, boys."

"I ain't quar'lin'!" Longwood defended himself with still a louder tone. "Axin' me — an' I won't stan' it — ez ter what Eli Strobe said an' did n't say, ter make me 'low he hed gone deranged!"

His voice, rasping and querulous, caused Clem Sanders

to look up with scowling disfavor from the game of which he had been an absorbed spectator. His frown grew blacker as the final words fell upon the air. "Gone deranged!" he sneered. "Air you-uns a-spreadin' that gossip yit, kase the man hed a fever, an' war a leetle out'n his head? I do declar', ye make me laff." His face seemed far from laughing, so indignant and flushed it was.

"A man can't stay out'n his head jes' with fever from August — election day air fust Thursday in August — plumb till the middle o' October, an' past. That's when Andy hearn Eli Strobe a-maunderin'," Hull excitedly argued.

"I never said he maundered," Longwood protested vehemently. "I ain't a-goin' ter tell what he said."

Clem Sanders had worn a startled, troubled face as he hearkened to Hull's exposition of these dates. He seemed overpowered, convinced against his will. Then his anxious hope for Marcella's sake making him ingeniously sanguine, he turned fiercely toward Longwood.

"An' what sort'n jedge be you-uns? Gone deranged! Nobody hev gone haffen ez fur deranged ez you-uns. Ye ain't got two atoms o' brains ter keep one another comp'ny in that thar great big lonesome head o' yourn."

Longwood winced palpably before this vigorous scorn. The consideration with which he had been treated earlier in the evening had served to foster his self-esteem. The blacksmith was a man of mark in the community and enjoyed great popularity, and Longwood deprecated a "backing down" from this source. He was prone to strut and swagger, and Hull's pretended deference had made him adopt a still more assuming pose.

He forgot his pangs of conscience, Marcella, the consequence to Eli Strobe, — all, — in the tumult of his self-importance and the desire to assert himself.

"Jedge o' goin' deranged! Even you-uns, I reckon, would hev hed gumption enough ter sense what war the matter ef ye hed hearn him declarin' — like I done — ez he hed

killed Teck Jepson, bruk his neck, an' kep' axin' whar Teck war buried, an' who preached the fun'al sermon, an' ef his harnt hed sot out ter walk ! I reckon ye'd hev 'lowed he war deranged, ef ye hed hearn all that ! ”

He hurled forth these words upon Clem Sanders, who sat as one petrified, a stony dismay on his face, and seeming scarcely to breathe. Hull was excited, laughing a little, half in triumph, half in ridicule of the grotesque folly of thus revealing the secret that had been so carefully withheld from the inquiries hardly yet silent upon the air. The inconsequent Longwood, in the flush of his victory over the blacksmith, did not even dimly appreciate what he had done, till, turning, he saw Hull's face, wooden no longer, and the satirically laughing Dake. He wilted a trifle ; then with an effort to regain his manly port, he demanded in an offended tone, “ What be ye fellers a-laffin' at ? ”

Hull showed some aptitude for the affairs in which he intermeddled merely for reasons of consanguinity. “ So funny,” he replied evasively, — “ so durned funny, the idee o' Teck Jepson bein' dead ! I wish he war ! ”

“ That would n't do we-uns no good,” said Dake. “ We-uns can't find whar Jake Baintree an' his pardner air hidin' in the mountings enny better ef Teck war dead than livin'.”

Jube Donnard ceased to scrape the old violin ; the other men gathered close about ; the game of cards paused midway ; the very name of Baintree and his confederate seemed to supersede all other interests. Only Andy Longwood held apart, realizing with a sinking heart that he had given the clew — the subject of insanity — upon which the investigations would be pushed ; otherwise, so sane was Strobe on every other point, he might have escaped, even though the inquiry were prompted and prosecuted by his political enemies.

He sat down upon the shoeing-stool, leaning his head against the chimney, and tried to reflect on what he had done and what it might precipitate. Perhaps it was the



heat of the fire, perhaps the effects of the whiskey he had drunk: his head drooped more and more, and presently he was asleep, all oblivious of the absorbed group and the topic that so engrossed them.

Even the enthusiast at the bellows had deserted the scene of his ambition, and joined the others. The tone of the conversation intimated that the subject was a recurrent one, and each speaker had the air of producing his remark rather from a long train of previous reflection than upon the impulse of the moment.

"I dunno what ter think o' Teck Jepson," pursued Dake. "Some o' the boys 'lowed ez Baintree an' his pardner ez purtends ter be a-sarchin' fur silver hed been warned, else Rathburn never would hev kem down ter the forge so early in the night with sech a plain, harmless tale."

"Who would go a-hidin' sech ez tryin' ter git holt of a silver mine, ennyhow?" demanded Jube logically. "I 'll gin my cornsent ter his findin' all the silver mines in the kentry. So would other folks, an' he be 'bleeged ter know it."

"Teck never denied they war warned, whenst faced with the fac'," said one of the card-players, the superseded pack in his hand.

"An' Teck 'lowed," said the other, "ez he knowed who warned 'em. He hed ter 'low that whenst I taxed him with it. He said he would n't lie."

"But he would n't tell who done it," interpolated Jube, the violin lying idle and silent on his knee.

"Naw, sir!" exclaimed Dake. "I jes' argufied with him fur a good hour an' better, tryin' ter pint out his jewty ter the benighted critter, fairly sodden in the pride o' his religion. I tole him 't war his jewty ter his kentry. An' he jes' 'lowed ez he hed seen the face o' jewty too often not ter know it, an' that all the legions o' hell an' all the hosts o' heaven could not make him reveal that name ter mortal ears."

The blacksmith, his ponderous arms folded, his head bent

as he sat on the anvil and listened, rose suddenly, with a deep sigh, and walked once or twice the length of the little shop. He had refrained from speaking, fearing his lawless tongue might betray his intimate knowledge of the mystery that so baffled them. His silence had not been noted, but his movement brought him to the minds of the others, and one of the card-players demanded : —

“Did you-uns onderstan’, Clem, this hyar Rathburn ter say ez him an’ Jake war a-campin’ on the range ter the west o’ Brumsaidge? Whenst we-uns went up on the mounting, the t’other day, I do declar’ I b’lieve we sarched every squar’ mile fur ten mile, a-bushwhackin fur ’em.”

“That air what I onderstood him ter say,” replied the blacksmith cautiously, coming to a halt in the middle of the floor. “On the mounting ter the west. But I never paid no partic’lar ’tention ter him. I war a-mendin’ of his tool, an’ Jepson done the talkin’. I ’lowed ye ’d be sati’fied with whatever Jepson done.”

“But he never done nuthin’!” cried Dake angrily. “Swaller a big tale ’bout’n sarchin’ fur silver ez easy ez skim milk, an’ then let the evil-doer slip through his fingers like pickin’ up water!”

“’Thout even findin’ out whar ter git him agin ef we-uns wanted him!” exclaimed Jube Donnard.

There was a silence. Each was conscious of a thought that he shared with the others, but as yet none had put it into words. The dim red glow of the coals slowly smouldering under the sooty hood suffused the dusky place, and but dimly revealed the great slouching figures of the mountaineers, as they lounged about on the few seats that the shop afforded, or stood with their hands in their pockets and deliberated. Outside of the widely opened doors the night gloomed. All was indistinguishable in the deep obscurity save the line of the western horizon, a dull copper hue, and against it were visible the gnarled limbs of the old tree just without the forge, each bough and twig black

and distinct as it moved slightly in the wind. Now and again drops fell in quick, convulsive patterings from the growth of evergreen laurel on the slope of the hill, and sometimes the eaves added a few monotonous drippings to the rivulets in the gullies below, running fast and loud in the silence.

"Thar hev been a traitor 'mongst we-uns," said Dake presently.

"Ye say that ez ef it war news," sneered Bassett, still standing in the door.

"I reckon all o' the boys hev sorter sensed who 't war," observed Dake.

"Ye 'member how keen Teck Jepson war fur appealin' ter Judge Lynch, ez he called it, whenst Baintree war fust let off from the court fur a-killin' o' Sam'l Keale, an' whenst enny fool mought hev knowed the kentry would do nuthin' agin the jury's say-so?" Bassett remarked discursively.

The others stared at him through the red dusk of the shadowy place, surprised by this reminiscent turn to the conversation.

"Of course," assented Jube, by way of giving him an impetus.

"That war a blind. He never wanted nuthin done ter Baintree, — oh, ye need n't tell me!" For there was an incredulous laugh here and there in his audience.

"Shucks, Joe!" exclaimed Jube, turning aside as if he would once more lift the violin, then pausing and looking over his shoulder as Bassett resumed.

"An' t'other night, up at Clem's barn, he war dead agin hangin' or ennythin' 'thout them men war diskivered in mo' wrong-doin' sence killin' Sam'l Keale, — ez ef they 'd up an' tell 'bout thar wrong-doin's with all o' we-uns in a hunderd yards of 'em, an' they hevin' been warned, an' Teck Jepson knowin' who warned 'em!"

"I'd like ter know who warned 'em. That busybody would be done with warnin's," declared one of the card-players. "I'd strangle that tattle-tale with a mighty good will, ef I hed the chance!"

"Hesh up! I'll lay ye low with that thar sledge o' mine!" cried Clem peremptorily, the image of Marcella in his mind.

"Laws-a-massy, Clem," protested the card-player pacifically, surprised at his vehemence.

"Then," pursued Bassett, all unheeding, a logical end in contemplation, "we-uns hev let Teck Jepson git the upper hand o' us, so ez he felt full bold ter let that Rathburn go, an' stayed argufyin' with we-uns in the barn jes' ter prevent us from goin' arter him an' capturin' him, so ez him an' Baintree would git off scot-free."

"We-uns knowed all that afore," said Hull placidly.

"Waal," drawled Bassett slowly, but his eyes gleamed with excitement and his pulse quickened, "mebbe ye don't know ez I viewed Jepson a-standin' in his door this very evenin', a-shakin' hands with this very Baintree ez he always purtended ter despise so, an' ez we-uns can't find high or low, — shakin' hands, sir, shakin' hands frien'ly an' per-lite, ez ef Baintree war the pa'son!"

There were two or three sharp, inarticulate exclamations, and dead silence ensued.

"We-uns hev been powerful deceived in this man ez hev fairly ruled Brumsaidge Cove!" said one of the mountaineers at last, smarting with the sense of being overreached.

"His rule air over!" cried Bassett, "else he hev stamped out every mite o' pluck 'mongst us in his rule, ez ye call it."

"Why, now, look-a-hyar, Joe, how air ye a-countin' fur his bein' frien'ly with Baintree? He ain't a fool like this hyar Rathburn, hankerin' arter silver ez Jake kin find," urged Dake, dazed by the revelation, and seeking some adequate motive that might explain it.

Bassett had come forward into their midst. He stood with his hands in his pockets, his face grave but with suppressed excitement in every line of it, and now and then glancing over his shoulder at the broad open door, where a mist lurked shifting and shimmering, vaguely perceived in the dull red glow of the forge fire.

"Why, what kin it mean, boys," he said, "'ceptin' we-uns hev been fooled from the beginnin'? Teck would n't act so ef Baintree did n't hev a hank over him somehows, — could put him inter a mighty heap o' trouble ef he did other-wise. Ez long ez Baintree hev been kep' under our watch Teck hev b'friended him; afore that he 'peared ez much agin him ez ennybody, jes' ez a blind ter keep folks from s'picionin' them."

But what kin Teck hev done ez Baintree be in an' knows about? 'Thar ain't no crime been c'mitted in these parts," ruminated Dake, his mind rummaging the possibilities, "'ceptin' — 'ceptin'" — he drawled on uncertainly; then he suddenly glanced up, his eyes alight — "'ceptin' the mysterious takin'-off o' Sam'l Keale, five year ago an' better."

He had guessed Bassett's suspicion; he saw this in his crony's eyes, and the strength of his own suggestion was increased by its duplication. The others stirred uneasily, but the crime was a mystery never solved, and what could be more inexplicable than the fact that Jepson was seen shaking hands with the man whom he had denounced and threatened again and again, a contemptible wretch, and the outcast of the mountains?

"Ye 'low," said Dake, "ez Jepson hed some hand in that business what ain't never been brought ter light?"

"Elsewise what ails him ter purtect Baintree an' his comical doctor-man, an' ter swear he won't tell who warned 'em, an' ter be seen, when he thunk he war safe from view, a-shakin' hands mighty frien'ly with the man he hev purtended ter run down?"

Bassett suddenly leaned forward, caught Dake's hand, and went through the dumb show of a friendly parting, while the others looked on through the red glow of the fire. Then he flung himself back against the wall, laughing aloud, — a fleering falsetto laugh, that jarred the solemn silence beneath the bare trees, and echoed far along the road through the Settlement.

## XXIV.

It is one of the incongruities of sentiment that the grief of an unworthy subject for a puny cause should have the poignant force and dignity of pain, and demonstrate that universality of human susceptibility to mental suffering with which the species is endowed. Mrs. Bowles might have seemed of altogether too flimsy a moral constitution to experience so adequately the surprise, the anger, the anguish, that consecutively possessed her upon the discovery of the little mountaineer's disappearance. Bob's own mother could hardly have shed more tears. As she forecast the gossip of the Cove, it might have appeared that only the repute heretofore of phenomenal graces of disposition could warrant the quivering shrinking she felt in coming at a disadvantage before the popular censor.

"Folks will 'low ez how I hed treated him mean, — though ef he war my own child an' hed runned away, they 'd 'low he war a mean brat, an' would turn out a evil man. But bein' I'm a stepmother, I'll git the blame. An' ter think how I hev slaved fur him, — patched an' let out seams, an' him a-growin' out'n every gyarmint ez ef he'd grow out'n the roof ; an' kep' him clean ez soap an' water knowed how ! I'll be bound he's tore his petticoats haffen off'n him in tatters, an' got muddy an' scratched with briers, afore he shows hisse'f — a mis'able mean shoat ! — in the Cove, a object o' pity, an' everybody a-tattlin' how M'ria White, ez married a Bowles, like a fool, treats her step-chil'n, till they runs away from her, an' dares the wild beast an' the mountings ter be shet of her."

And once more she burst into tears. She had her good

qualities, which were chiefly housewifely, and she had not pretermitted her labors in washing the dishes and scouring the cooking utensils in order to indulge her grief. Perhaps it was the more effective as she held the plate aside to lean sobbing against the chimney jamb ; then she wiped her eyes perfunctorily upon her apron, and went on with her work, while the tears streamed anew.

Her husband stood helplessly looking on, a pale, ashen hue upon his lank, indefinite countenance, a startled anxiety in his mild blue eyes, that seemed distended with abnormal faculties, as if they beheld a frightful possibility not within the actual field of vision. He had searched the immediate vicinity as thoroughly as might be for the infantile fugitive, and his heart sank within him as he reflected upon the measureless mountain wilds encompassing the little home on every hand, the hideous chasms and steepes, the lurking beasts of prey. He could not look upon the trundle-bed, the covering thrown off, and a deep indentation on the further side, where the fat little body had been cosily intrenched all night, with nobody knows what dreams in his head, or wakefully devising his callow schemes.

With the alert paternal despair, Bowles felt that he would never again see there the rotund little fellow. He had not his wife's capacity for self-centred sorrow, and it was impossible for him to regard the incident personally except with keen and subtle spasms of remorse, his ingenuity fertile in devising more reasons for repentance than the bountiful reality afforded.

"M'ria — M'ria," he said tremulously, "I feel obligated ter go down an' roust up all the men in the Cove ter sarch. A b'ar or a painter mought — mought" — He could not go on.

"Shucks !" retorted his wife contemptuously. "Ef he 's eat, he 's eat, an' the men in the Cove can't hender."

She slapped the dishes down upon the table as she successively wiped each piece, and there was temper very prominently apparent even in her tears.

"They mought hev dragged him ter thar den, — I hev hearn o' sech doin's," the luckless Bowles urged desperately.

"I know what den he 's in : he 's in the den o' that painter or wolf ye call Teck Jepson, — that 's who hev 'ticed him off."

She was sorry she had spoken when she noted how Bowles's face cleared, how he clutched at this hope ; for it was one of the prime essentials of her grief that it should be shared, and if sympathy did not prompt her companions to make it their own, she presently gave them ample occasion to sorrow for their own sake. This bloodless elucidation of Bob's disappearance had early occurred to her. He was trying to make his way to his uncle, and by reason of the dense undergrowth it would be difficult for him to do aught but follow the path which would certainly lead him to the Cove, where he would probably meet and electrify every important personage of Mrs. Bowles's world before encountering the object of his search.

"That 's a fac'!" cried Bowles joyfully. "I'll go straight down yander ter Teck's an' see." A cloud overcast his face. "It 's a long way, — he'll never git thar. He'll set down an' go ter sleep on the side o' the road — an' su'thin' wild mought ketch him thar. I'll go — I'll go, straight."

"Naw, I'll go myse'f," said Mrs. Bowles, with another gush of tears. "I ain't goin' ter hev ye, an' Teck Jepson, an' Bob — yer great fine Bob! — a-showin' off yer mis'ries down in the Cove, an' a-makin' out ez I be tur'ble enough ter harry ye all out'n house an' home. Naw, sir, I'm goin' myse'f, an ye'll bide hyar an' take keer o' them t'other two chil'n, an' purvent them from runnin' away."

Sim and A'minty had already been given reason to mourn on their own behalf, Mrs. Bowles fancying that she detected in their sullen little faces a relish of her lachrymose outbursts and protests against this untoward fate that had somehow got the upper hand of her. But despite the channels



of tears drying on their cheeks, that spark of triumph still shone in their eyes, and she could not quench it. She saw it anew as they looked up on being mentioned, and she was once more moved to accuse them of complicity in Bob's flight, which had been the pretext of the previous trouncings.

"Ye A'minty, ye better tell me which way Bob went, an' what he 'lowed he war goin' ter do," she said, stopping in her domestic duties, and standing with arms akimbo, gazing down at the tousled red head and tallowy freckled face of the little girl.

A'minty looked old and very cautious as she spoke; she held the yellow cat, with the green eyes, close up under her chin and against her neck, — what a comfort the soft, furry, purring thing was!

"I dunno!" she declared. "Bob don't talk none sca'cely, 'ceptin' 'bout'n vittles."

"I'll be bound he talks 'bout vittles, — vittles what I cook fur him!" cried Mrs. Bowles, with a new cadence of despair. "Ter think I lef' my good home an' a plenty o' marryin' chances down in the Cove, ter kem up hyar an' weave an' sew an' spin an' cook an' slave from mornin' till night, an' fetch up another 'oman's chil'n, an' *yit* git n'ised about all round the Cove ez bein' mean, an' no-count, an' neglec'ful. I jes' know how dirty Bob will be afore he gits ter the Cove, dirty an' tore up, an' got on the wust dress he hev got ter save his life, — an' folks will be 'lowin' ez I hev repented o' my bargain a-marryin', an' hev made a mighty pore match. The Lord knows I did, but I don't want Peter Bryce a-swaggerin' round, tickled ter death, an' 'lowin' I hed better hev tuk him whenst I could git him."

"Laws-a-massy, M'ria, Peter Bryce knows ye would n't gin him two thoughts ter save his life," said Bowles. "Heaps o' folks's chil'n air fractious an' gin 'em trouble, whether they air step-chil'n or no." The temporizer's art had become singularly facile and effective in the continuous exercise which had been given it. Mrs. Bowles's countenance cleared for a

moment; then — perhaps it was a definite perception of the truth, which was so palpable that she could not permit herself to believe that it would be less apparent to others than to herself — it was clouded anew, and she broke forth angrily: —

“Naw! I jes’ know what a name will be gin me by Peter Bryce, an’ Teck Jepson, an’ them sanctified women folks in the Cove, ’lowin’ ez I be cruel, an’ cut an’ slash the chil’n, I reckon. They ’ll take no notice o’ how fat Bob be! Teck Jepson sot the chil’n all agin me whenst he fust kem hyar ter live. Hain’t ye hearn Bob talk a heap ’bout his uncle Teck? — tell me now, Sim.”

Sim twisted one bare foot over the other. He had grown slow in being so doubtful of what might please, or rather least displease. He continued silent, with his look of stupid cogitation, until she observed threateningly, “Now sulk, ef ye air so minded,” when he broke forth precipitately: —

“Bob say uncle Teck air big an’ high, an’ hev kilt a heap o’ painters an’ b’ars — an’ — an’,” he faltered, “ef ennybody tuk arter him, uncle Teck war a-goin’ ter settle ’em; all he hed ter do war ter let uncle Teck know.”

Mrs. Bowles whirled round in triumph.

“Thar, now!” she exclaimed to her husband. “What did I tell ye? I hearn Teck say them very words ter that thar chile the las’ night he war hyar. He’s gone ter Teck Jepson! Teck Jepson hev enticed him away! Teck Jepson air yer painter an’ yer wolf!”

Once more she burst into stormy tears. It is a hard thing to say of her, but the catastrophe that threatened the child lost in the savage wilderness seemed less terrible to her than the mental picture of Bob at large in the Cove, revealing to the gossips the secrets of the domestic administration at the cabin in the notch of the mountain.

She made her preparations somewhat swiftly after that, — although she did not neglect to prepare and set aside a goodly amount of wholesome food for the consumption of the family

during her absence, — animated by the intention of allowing Bob as little time as possible to ventilate, consciously or unconsciously, the domestic discords. She wished very heartily, as she mounted the horse which Jepson had lent them, that she was leaving the door never to enter it again ; but as she looked about the little cabin, with the solemn purple mountains clustering in the background, and took note of the silence and solitude that possessed the world, save within those paltry inclosures where the pigs and the poultry fed, and within the house with the sullen, brow-beaten children in the porch, she reflected that she was likely to grow gray here, and she sighed deeply as she took up the reins. There is no sorrow nor sympathy so sincere as that which we feel for ourselves. She could not even be sure of Ben Bowles's grief for her mortification, indefinite and docile as he was. He stood, to be sure, with a long face and a hand shielding his much-grooved brow and his eyes from the glare rather than the sun, — for it lurked behind the clouds, and only from tenuous areas of vapor it sent forth this occasional tempered white suffusion, — and dutifully watched her out of sight ; but one might well fancy that it was a day of more quiet and peace within doors than the cabin had known since the bride came home ; and even she, with all her personal arrogations, was aware that he relished it.

The day was gray. The heights wore a deep purple with a vague blue and blurring effect, as if some invisible, impalpable veil of mist had interposed a short distance from the wooded slopes. There was rain in the clouds, but they loitered ; no downfall was threatened for some hours yet : nevertheless, mindful of the freshness of a crisp pink calico dress and bonnet, Mrs. Bowles doubted the reliability of her own resources as a weather-prophet. She drew up the horse where the road forked, and hesitated. It was not such weather as she would have chosen for a jaunt into the Cove, and she winced from the idea of presenting herself,

forlorn and bedraggled by the rain, among her old acquaintances. She needed all her fortitude and all the prestige of fresh and immaculate attire. She wished that she had let Bowles undertake the expedition in her stead, as he had proposed. She was on the point of turning back, when another of those white suffusions through the translucent clouds gave cheer to the landscape, lifted suddenly into definite color and hopeful augury for the rest of the day. "An' I'll take the short cut," she muttered, as she turned the horse aside into the less traveled and weed-grown way. But for the thinning of the leaves on the bushes that grew close on either hand, and the sere, dried, wisp-like estate of the grasses and weeds in its midst, it might have appeared more like a groove amongst the foliage than a path; but here and there it emerged into rocky spaces, where it wound with definite curves, and she wondered that it should present this trodden and well-worn aspect. "Cows take along it, I reckon," she hazarded.

There was no moisture on the leaves nor on the withered grasses, and there seemed an incongruity in this, with the lowering lead-tinted sky full of rain, and the dank smell of moisture in the air, for there had been "falling weather" somewhere in the vicinity. She heard a rain-crow raucously call out in the silence, and then all was still, so still! The summer songs of weed and twig were hushed; the air was void,—no whirl of birds, no whisking gossamer cicada; the stir of the crisp dry grass under her horse's hoofs and the creak of the saddle as it swayed slightly were loud and assertive in default of other sound. Now and again she observed how the mountains changed their aspect, viewed from a different point; but however the contour varied, that sombre purple tint filled the landscape, save when the distance dulled it to gray. A drear day, shut in by clouds and strangely without moral perspectives as well; all the outlook seemed limited by that gray, silent presence, that had an aspect of perpetuity like a doom, as if it would lift no more.

She had been nearly an hour in the saddle, and the valley appeared but little nearer than at the outset. She began to doubt if the little mountaineer could have reached the Cove. "It's a good piece, — a good piece," she said meditatively. "But then Bob mus' walk a hunderd mile a day, I reckon, playin' round like he do, an' he be plumb survigrous."

She had neared a depression in the range, through which was visible a section of the Carolina mountains. She turned her eyes mechanically toward them, hardly noting a little cabin that she had known to be deserted for many a year, and that stood on the slope of a great dome which towered far above. The distant ranges were gray as those nearer at hand; nowhere in the world was a brighter spot visible than the dull encompassing monotony. No movement, not even the slow shifting of the mountain mist, till suddenly a handsome gray mare trotted out from the rear of the cabin, where Mrs. Bowles now perceived was a flimsy shanty of a barn. A heap of ashes lay at one side of the yard. Her approach frightened away a weasel that had been feeding on some broken bits of food by the doorstep. The cabin was evidently tenanted.

"Waal, sir!" she soliloquized. "I never knowed ez ennybody hed moved up ter this old house, — ez be fairly fallin' ter pieces," she added, her critical eye taking note of the dilapidated doorsteps, the rotten rail fence, broken down to the ground in many places, the strange lack of garden or field. So lonely was her life on the mountain, so uncongenial the companionship to which she had doomed herself, that she had at first experienced a glow of gratulation to discover neighbors, even so distant as this; now it was tempered by the fear that innates so shiftless and uncaring as the external evidences would intimate could hardly prove a valuable acquisition. She had drawn rein, and sat motionless in the saddle, silently contemplating the scene, each new item of neglect or decay that presented itself to her observation adding to the reprobation expressed in the primly

disapproving compression of the flexible lips and the quick glances of her bead-like eyes from under the brim of her pink sun-bonnet. Her code of manners and morals, and her stringent requisites for the government of other people, were very complete, and her record as a diligent and exacting censor had few instances of relaxation or clemency. She was on the point of turning away, taking a certain satisfaction in the thought that she would make no overtures to people with a doorstep like that, when it suddenly occurred to her that the vagrant Bob might have earlier discovered the dwellers in this secluded nook, and have established himself upon the footing of an occasional visitor. Her face changed. "He mought be in that house this minit," she reflected hopefully. "Likely ez not he hain't gone down to the Cove at all."

There was no sign of the usual guard-dogs about the house, and as she slipped down from the saddle upon the ground her curiosity was all newly aquiver, since it could be gratified at no cost of personal dignity; for she came not to offer her acquaintance, but upon her own important errand, the search for her step-child. There are few people who can feel so exclusive a joy in trimness and freshness as did Mrs. Bowles, for it was her belief that there had never been so crisp a pink calico since the Great Smoky Mountains were built; and indeed, a stranger who had no previous acquaintance with Mrs. Bowles and her methods could not have failed to consider the color of her attire singularly clear and dainty in the dark, gray day, and the glimpse of the smooth olive complexion and glancing dark eyes and shadowy dark hair eminently prepossessing. As she stood on the contemned doorstep and tapped lightly upon the door, she smoothed down a fold with a calm pleasure in anticipating the effect of her appearance on the members of the household, and the depths of envy into which it would plunge them. Some moments were beguiled with these reflections before she became impatient because of no

response. When she knocked again, the ensuing silence was so marked that her attention was diverted from the personal considerations that had absorbed her, and she began to look about with a keener curiosity, hampered, nevertheless, by a thrill of vague fear. She sent a glance that had all the incentive of prying toward the batten shutter, in which she had noted, with disparaging eyes, a long rift; it was not so high from the ground; she might have peered through had she dared. She did not dare; she only knocked again, and began to doubt whether any one were within. But for the ashes and the broken bits of food — and once more she heard the hoof-beats of the mare trotting back to her stall, satisfied by her sally for investigation — the place would have seemed as lonely, as deserted, as she had always known it hitherto. Perhaps it was the sense of solitude that emboldened her; perhaps the phenomenal opportunity of observing the domestic methods and rummaging the belongings of the absent dwellers. The door, not well closed, had moved under her hand, as she knocked upon it; it was evidently unlatched. She pressed it a trifle further ajar. Then she was still for a moment, the dark red color suffusing her cheek, responsive to an imaginary rebuke to so unmannerly an intruder. But no word broke the silence. The door shifted a trifle, so ill-hung it was, and Mrs. Bowles advanced her foot on the threshold. The next moment she drew back with a sharp cry. A man was stretched at full length on the floor, with a pallid, pinched face, — a face like death.

## XXV.

EUGENE RATHBURN could hardly be said to have awakened from his deep sleep, that stormy night in the Great Smoky Mountains, when Jake Baintree kept his strange vigil by the side of the dying fire. The alien scenes of his dream were suddenly possessed by a wild, unrealized tumult. His dormant consciousness became in some sort aware of a piercing sound, a fibrous, funnel-shaped glare, fierce but fleeting, and then he saw no more, knew no more, not even thus vaguely. How long he lay there on the floor of the mountain hut, in a pool of his own blood, he never sought to compute. One morning, while the rain yet beat on the roof, and the gullies ran full beneath the eaves; while the mists still further secluded the solitary spot, practically as inaccessible as if it had been lifted amidst the clouds that closed about it, his memory came back to him, his identity renewed with his body its coexistence, and he realized who it was lying wounded, fevered, exhausted from the loss of blood, on the fireless hearth, where he had fallen asleep when it was all a-sparkle and aglow, his own pistol, smoke-blackened, albeit but freshly cleaned and oiled, on the floor beside him.

"When the corpse is found," he said impersonally, "if it ever is found, it might suggest a suicide."

He experienced a feeble surprise to gauge the interest with which he noted the relative position of his weapon and his helpless body, and vaguely presaged the deductions of the coroner's jury.

The fallibility of the supposititious verdict recurring to his mind after the sense of a long and vacant interval made him



aware that he had again been unconscious, and had but now revived anew. Somehow, he wondered that he had ever dwelt upon it. He no longer thought of himself as the lifeless shell that might lie here impassive till some chance — nay, the predestined urgency of retribution — should lead hitherward a stranger's step to discover Jake Baintree's crime. He felt the throb of a turbulent resentment. He thirsted for revenge. A frail tenement, to be sure, his shattered body afforded for these robust and full-pulsed passions. Professionally speaking, he presently recognized the symptom with a new hope, — he was stronger, far stronger than he had thought. He had slept, he was sure, — slept despite his burning thirst, his gnawing pain. He had a dual series of impressions, the keenness of the one hardly mitigated by the poignancy of the other. He took note of his own sensations, both as physician and patient, and when he had lifted himself upon his elbow to examine the wounds, — there were two, the pistol-shots fired at such close range as to scorch his garments, — his face blanched to a yet more pallid tint as he looked ; but with a sort of mechanical professional reticence he said not a word that might have roused the alarm of a patient in like case. As he lay back upon the blood-soaked rug, he closed his eyes to wait, — to hope that it might not be long. His wounds were serious enough in any case, but here, without food, parched with thirst, without skilled care or the merest ignorant help, it was only a question of time. His mind canvassed the alternatives, — to die of his wounds and the exposure, or to starve. As he thought of the relative anguish of the two fates that impended, he felt that his wounds were not so hopeless ; he had doubtless exaggerated their menace ; he would starve to death, here in these lofty altitudes, very slowly, very painfully ; for although he was of no great stature or muscular strength, his constitution was tough and promised resistance. "I'll have an awful time before I get off," he said to himself in a panic. He writhed slightly as he spoke, although

he had sedulously sought to lie still, that the gaping wounds might not bleed afresh, and as he stirred his hand touched something cold, from which he recoiled. It was only the barrel of his pistol, sleek and shining, and with a ready suggestion lurking in its muzzle. The time might be no longer than he willed it, the pain no greater than he chose to bear. He had a definite technical knowledge wherewith to plant the ball in lieu of Baintree's clumsy haphazard ignorance. He drew back his hand from the cold touch of the insensate metal that beguiled him with this reasoning from out its hollow jaws; he shrank from the idea as if he definitely appreciated the crime to which he was tempted. "No," he said aloud in a strong voice, — "no, my good friend Jake, this is *your* job, and you shall swing for it. I'll do nothing to hinder, if I lie here a year and a day in the pangs of hunger."

Once more he recognized, with a start, the lapse of a vacant interval. His professional consciousness, first of all his mental faculties, took note of it. "Sleep is the best thing, — quiet and sleep, — itself a curative agent," he muttered feebly, drowsing off again. He waked now, however, at frequent intervals. Once he noted that the rain had ceased its melancholy drone on the roof, and once he heard the wind. The mists fell away from the window, where he had dully marked their presence close to the rift in the batten shutter, and feeble shafts of sunlight flickered across the melancholy, fireless hearth, and anon faded out. Suddenly a galvanic thrill jarred every pulse, as he lay motionless, his eyelids half closed. Delirium, surely. How hard it was, he thought, that he would have differentiated the symptoms so certainly were the hurt another man's, but that even his own professional skill could avail him naught, could not serve as the one friend in the world he had earned, as he lay here dying and alone in this innermost seclusion of solitude! Deny it however his reason might, call it fever, or fantasy, or fear, his eyes were fastened on Baintree's face

peering in at the rifts of the shutter, — peering in, a pallid, drawn, distorted likeness of himself, such as might haunt the dying dreams of the man he had murdered. Fact or fiction, the sight petrified Rathburn. He did not stir a fibre ; his half-closed eyes were fixed ; while his mind took eager cognizance of the probability that this should be the figure to loom in his fevered fancy, he wondered that the delirium should so furnish forth the detail and circumstance of its delusion ; that the face in the rift of the shutter should blanch, and shrink away, and come again, with a look of fascinated horror, to peer within ; that the figment of fever should put up a hand, so long, so thin, so well remembered, to hold the flapping shutter still ; that the mere idea of crafty, furtive, terrified eyes should scan the lines of his motionless figure with an expression he could never have imagined, as if hoping to detect a movement, yet fearing, and then despairing. Suddenly, with a spasm of remorse that naught but the actuality of anguish could depict upon a human countenance, the face disappeared. Was it fancy, too, or did he hear the dead leaves rustle beneath a shambling step ? Other ears, hardly so keen, so expectant, as his own, took heed. There was the tramp of hoofs outside, trotting from the shanty of a stable and around the house, and his mare's shrill whinny of recognition rang out cheerfully, as if the creature welcomed the sight of any familiar being, so long left lonely as she had been. Rathburn doubted no more. He heard his feeble breath flutter, his faint heart beat, the sound seeming loud and obstructive in the silence, so did his ear yearn to follow the footsteps, hoping that they were bearing Jake Baintree away, satisfied that his work had been done thoroughly, and fearing lest he enter to reassure himself anew. It seemed long, long after he could detect no further intimation of Baintree's progress that the mare, whom he fancied standing still without, gazing after the slouching, retreating figure, turned, and slowly ambled back to her stall. Even in the tumult of his agita-

tion Rathburn reflected with satisfaction that she was at liberty, with food and running water at hand. "Else I'd have to get out of this somehow," he said, for he would have sacrificed much in the sacred cause of physical suffering; even a brute's pain might not appeal to him in vain. A new hope came to him. Could he but foster the strength to lift himself, to creep to the door, to make shift to mount the animal, he might still escape; he might reach some friendly hut, and, with food and nursing, save his life. With hope a torturing fear arose because the mare was at liberty. She would grow tired and lonely, and would wander away. He heard again the quick beat of her hoofs, as she came snorting forth once more, expectant of Baintree's return. He forgot her the next moment, in the realization of what this possibility boded for him. Remorse, was it, on Baintree's face, as he peered in at the rigid form, so still on the fireless hearth? How long would it have lasted, Rathburn asked himself, with a sneer, had the rigid form moved, had the eyelids stirred, had Baintree possessed more expert knowledge of the signs of death? A chance might bring him back, as a chance had brought him first to gaze, with a fascinated horror, on the deed he had done, and then he would do it, in self-defense, more surely. No sound, no stir without, listen as he might, but the wind and the scudding leaf, till presently, with a long-drawn breath, the mare trotted back once more to munch her corn.

Rathburn was all on the alert, although he strove to lie still and calm his nerves. "All this excitement is bad," he rebuked himself, as if he were an unruly patient. And then relapsing into his other *rôle*, he strove to adjust his mind in obedience to the professional dictum. He could sleep no more, with the expectation, the fear, of Baintree's return vigilant in every nerve. He watched the sunlight strike across the floor, reddening now, with vague motes bespangling the broad bars, so still, so silent, that when a rat, swift and lean and whiskered, sped through it, he gave a start of re-

pulsion that sent a pain as of dislocation throughout his frame, and roused a new terror in his helplessness. But the rat fled as he lifted his hand, and his attention was called to the lure that had brought it from its hole — the broken bits of bread fallen from the table when overturned last night — last night? — he knew not how many nights ago, and never was the wiser. Some of the food was within his reach, — it had lain on the unswept floor, and the rats had perhaps fought over it; he had a strong loathing for it, but he felt better after eating a morsel of bread, and reflected that he was hardly likely to relish daintier food if he had had it. So much of vigor did it impart that he dragged himself, after a time, by slow and agonized degrees, across the floor to the shelf whereon was the little medicine-chest the gratuitous services of which he had proffered to Baintree. He lay still for some time, exhausted by his exertions, when he had crawled back to his pallet. At last, mindful of the dulling light, he opened the lid of the chest, and his hand poised hovering above the rows of bottles.

“This opportunity,” he remarked satirically, “of trying one’s remedies *in propria persona* is one which few young surgeons have the privilege of enjoying.”

And then he was reminded to glance up warily at the window, trembling anew at the thought of Baintree and the conclusive significance of his attitude should the crafty mountaineer once more peer through the window, lured again by some morbid fascination to the scene of his crime.

He was glad to watch the red light fade on the brown walls, to note the purpling spaces of the twilight through the rift in the batten shutter; for as the shadows mustered about him he felt indistinguishable in their midst, — indistinguishable even to eyes so keen, so furtive, as those he fancied forever at the window.

He thought of the caution, the vigilance, the skill, that, were he the poorest charity patient in the wards of a hospital, his wounds would command; and the contrast of his

plight here, to die so far from help, and the prospect of the suffering of the dreary interval before his release, forced a groan from his lips. He distrusted the treatment he had administered ; he had used perforce what he had, not what he would have chosen. His mind ran continually upon the remedies that he would have applied had the means been at hand. He kept thinking of himself as some impersonal patient. A gnawing trouble beset his mind because of the deficiency of his resources.

"I ought to get somebody to look after that chap. He's a goner, I reckon, but somebody ought to go through the motions of trying to save him."

His fever was rising ; more than once he caught himself lifted upon his elbow, and searching with dilated eyes amongst the rows of bottles in the chest, in the dim glimmer of the twilight, for he knew not what. "I ought n't to be trusted with these things !" he cried in a sudden lucid panic, as the realization of the rift between his discriminating mind and his groping, foolish hands, free to follow their own vague impulses amongst the powerful drugs, forced itself into his thoughts. He closed the lid with a snap, and gathering his strength and setting his teeth hard, he flung the chest from him, he knew not where in the darkness. He heard it crash against the wall and drop to the floor, with a fine, high, crystalline shiver, as of the breaking of the vials within ; then, as he lay still, with perverse ingenuity his uncontrollable thought began to canvass where it had fallen, deducing the locality from the sound. "Oh, I could get it again, get it mighty easy, if I am delirious, and could take enough poison to establish a suicide and set Jake Baintree free."

He dwelt upon the idea with irritable suspense, now and again starting violently, as if he truly harbored the fancied impulse that he sought to restrain. A stir without, — the approach of a real danger nullified this terror of the nerves. The dead leaves rustled. A step — the wind ? He lay motionless, hardly daring to breathe. It came again, and

presently a crunching sound and a snarl. He experienced momentary relief: some wild thing was gnawing the bones and bits of meat flung out into the yard, for the prospectors had not been careful housekeepers. He had often heard this as he chanced to wake at night, but now he reflected that the door must be ajar, — a touch would open it; and with his wounds and fever and helplessness he was at the mercy of the wild beasts. He reached out his hand to make sure that the revolver was beside him. In touching it his confidence was restored in some sort, yet in this environment he could not sleep, despite the drowsy influences of weakness and fever. The repulsion of it even in a measure dominated delirium. Sometimes he would hear his voice break forth incoherently upon the air; then subdue himself to silence to listen to the jaws of the startled beast, once more at work upon the bones.

Toward midnight the moon rose. Through the rift in the batten shutter the melancholy golden bars struck across the floor. The scene within, so hateful to his eyes, revived from the encompassing gloom, — the few chairs, the overturned table, the great, wide, vacant hearth, his long figure stretched at length amongst the rigid, blood-stiffened folds of the rug, and the untouched pallet of the fugitive. And later, down the broad shaft of the stick-and-clay chimney the clear lustre burned amid the fireless gray ashes, all gleaming white. No sound from without now, and the wind was laid. Here all solitary, save for the moon. As the reminiscent, meditative mood that comes in her train drowsed down with quiescent influence upon his senses, he wondered vaguely that he should think of the great golden disk, waning and yellow, as it looked when it hung above the pines without, and silvered the frosted grasses of the great bare dome of the mountain, and made the vast spaces of the sky blue with that fine deep tint of the lunar nights; not as it had looked elsewhere, in foreign lands, or shimmering in deep sea waters, or in the grotesque incongruity

of its melancholy and its poetry over the sordid streets of cities, — only here, where it seemed native. And the faces that came to him were not those that he had known in that wider life of his, conventional, comfortable, eventless, he seemed discarded by the past, an alien to the future. He could only think of the days just at hand, and of those who had walked through them, and his heart was bitter against them all, — all except Marcella. And somehow, with her face in his mind, and her name forming itself on his lips, he fell asleep in the silence of the dull gray dawn and the fading glammers of the yellow moon.

Her name was on his lips when he woke. “Marcella!” he cried aloud, with a vague idea that she was standing in the door. He lifted himself on his elbow, his heart throbbing with the thought that she had brought deliverance to him, and a fear that the image was but the distraught fantasy of his fevered brain. She seemed to change her identity before his very eyes. He had a vague sense that the walls were still resounding with a shrill cry; was it he who had uttered it, or she?

It was not repeated. Of all the possibilities to steady Mrs. Bowles’s nerves in this unlooked-for emergency, naught could have been as efficacious as the error of mistaking her for another woman.

“Tain’t Marcell’y!” she observed stiffly, while he still lay motionless, half lifted on his elbow, staring at her as if every faculty were merged in that of sight.

She made a motion as if to withdraw, despite her curiosity; then she bethought herself of her inexplicable intrusion, the breach of good manners on which she piqued herself, and thus of her errand.

“I knocked, but nobody answered,” she observed primly and politely, although her bead-like eyes, glancing to and fro, were distended to a degree which had no precedent of elasticity in their experience, as she noted the paucity of the furniture, the dust, the fireless hearth. “The door was on



the jar, an' I 'lowed I'd push it open, an' mebbe would see one o' the wimmen-folks o' the fambly." She said this with a manner which implied that she did not preferably confer with the men-folks. She assumed a matronly air as she proceeded: "I be a-sarchin' fur my leetle boy ez strayed off from home. Mebbe some o' the wimmen-folks hev seen him — ef they air up an' doin'." Thus she conveyed a reproof upon his seeming sloth and late hours. Once more her bead-like eyes quickly took an inventory of the belongings. "Whar be the wimmen-folks? A-washin' of clothes at the spring — *of a Wednesday?*"

Perhaps it was a pity, for the sake of discipline in the abstract and the promulgation of correct housekeeping principles, that these were merely mythical women to whose methods Mrs. Bowles thus definitely made known her objections. A somewhat lively life she might have led them on the Great Smoky, despite the wide, unpopulous stretches of wilderness. She turned her head as she stood on the vantage-ground of the doorstep which commanded the descent to the left of the cabin, where the path in sinuous vagaries led down among the bowlders to the spring. The growth about it was leafless now, and she could see the steely gleam of the water under the dull gray sky. It did not seem to move; its margin was solitary; no whisking, spiral twirls of smoke climbed that unwilling gray sky; no flash of red and yellow flames made cheerful the dull, dun wintry day, merrily wreathing about the great wash-kettle, and singing a roundelay with the bubble of the boiling water, and the sharp crackling of the briery fuel, and the strokes of the paddles beating the clothes white as behooved them; no agents of all this domestic industry were visible, with skirts pinned back and sleeves rolled up. Some such picture Mrs. Bowles's expectation had projected upon the gray background of wood and mountain; she turned with a bewildered stare from the blank nullity of the prospect. Her flexible lips were more firmly compressed, the bead-like

gleam of her eyes more definitely antagonistic, as she looked again at the recumbent figure. The tears had sprung to Rathburn's eyes, — he was so weak, so full of pain, the deliverance she had brought near so sorely needed, so beyond all license of hope! He could hardly speak in answer to her query, and when he did a sob was in his throat.

"Don't you see what's the matter?" Once more her unfriendly eyes dilated.

"Laziness," she declared unequivocally. "Though I reckon ye'd 'low ye air ailin' somehows." She turned to go. "Waal, I hev got no time ter waste. I'll jes' leave" — She was about to leave her respects for the "wimmen-folks," then concluded to deprive of the honor any house-keepers who maintained a hearth like that.

A low cry escaped Rathburn's lips; he held out his hand. "Don't you see I am dying — I am dying?" he exclaimed. "I have been murdered! I have been shot and left for dead!" Mrs. Bowles stared speechless at him. "Do you live near here? Can you get me away from this accursed place?" he continued, — "anywhere — anywhere to die but on this floor!"

"I live a good piece off," she replied. "Yander at the Notch. I be Mis' Bowles." Then with a sudden recollection of his ecstatic cry "Marcella!" she added, "Ef ye air 'quainted in the Cove, ye mus' hev hearn tell 'bout me. I war M'ria White." The name woke no responsive recognition in his face; he seemed agitated, exhausted, almost spent. "I be kin ter Marcellly Strobe — ye hev hearn her talk 'bout'n me?"

His tact was not prolonged beyond his other waning faculties. He forlornly shook his head, and Mrs. Bowles's face suddenly hardened. He had had something better, perchance, to talk of with Marcella Strobe; and he evidently had never even heard her name. They had already forgotten her in those precincts of the Cove, — forgotten her as if she had been carried away to her lifeless grave in the little

burying-ground instead of her living grave up on the mountain. A cynical sob rose into the throat of the exile. A forlorn yearning she experienced, very poignant, for all it was so pitiful a paradise from whose meagre joys she was excluded.

"I reckon yer folks will be back presently. I mus' be a-goin'," she said stiffly.

"I have no folks!" he exclaimed, his eyes once more wide with the terror of being deserted. "I have been shot — Baintree, Jake Baintree, shot me, and has gone. Nobody lives here, — nobody! He left me here to die."

He could not account for the terror in Mrs. Bowles's face. She turned very pale; she had backed toward the door. "I 'lowed ye talked sorter funny, — sorter like they say the valley folks do. I mought hev knowed ye war n't from this kentry. I'm sorry fur ye, but I be 'feard o' the moonshiners myself, an' " —

"I'm not a revenue officer!" Rathburn almost screamed, divining her thoughts, so well had he come to know the country people and their state of mind toward the officials of the Revenue Department. "I'm just a plain fool."

She hesitated. Somewhere in her limited spiritual capacity there was conscience enough to rebel against passing by on the other side. She looked at him more wistfully than might have seemed possible to those bright, soulless eyes.

"We have been trying to find silver," he gasped. "Baintree killed Samuel Keale in this same business, and now he has tried to kill me." The significant name, the mysterious tragedy, the bootless search for the precious metal, were all long familiar to her, and coerced belief in any subsequent development that might be predicated upon them. He noted the change in her face. "I wonder you have heard nothing about my being here; everybody in the Cove knows it now."

Mrs. Bowles winced to be found ignorant of what every-

body knew. Nevertheless she was equal to the occasion. "I be sech a stay-at-home," she said, her red lips parting over her fine teeth in a pleasant smile. "The mos' o' the news I know is what my chil'n air a-doin' of, an' how the pig-pen an' the poultry air a-thrivin'."

She is not the first woman of frustrated worldly ambitions who makes a boast of simple domesticity. But it was a sentiment eminently beguiling to the masculine mind.

She saw approval in his eyes; she saw, too, how handsome they were, albeit so hollow,—how intelligent. She relished an admiration calculated to be so discriminating. There was, however, nothing of the married coquette in Mrs. Bowles, and her manner was all that a discreet matron's might be. The utterly dead and cold aspect of the fireplace struck her anew as she came forward into the room. She was not a logical reasoner, but the dislocation of the domestic situation was sufficiently marked to smite even her ill-developed appreciation of cause and effect. "Who gin ye yer breakfus'?" she demanded, pausing to look down from under the roseate brim of her pink sun-bonnet.

He pointed at the broken fragments on the floor, beside the overturned table. "The rats," he said scornfully, but with tears in his eyes. "They have had a high old time dragging these scraps about the floor, and they were good enough to leave some in my reach."

Mrs. Bowles's shallow, round, shiny eyes looked from him to the bits he indicated, as if with difficulty she grasped the idea that a day could be begun, the light dawn, the sun go through the ceremony of rising, without the equally natural and essential phenomena of the getting of breakfast and the subsequent washing of dishes. "Waal, sir!" she exclaimed beneath her breath, coping at last with this revulsion of nature. "I'll make some coffee fust thing," she added aloud. "Leastwise," she continued, her eyes dwelling with disfavor on the array of cooking utensils, "ef thar's enny sech thing ez gittin' some o' the grime off'n that thar coffee-pot."

A starving man lay on the floor, but the coffee-pot in question was scoured outside with ashes, as well as inside, before the coffee was ground and set to boil; even the coffee-mill came in for energetic discipline of this sort, Mrs. Bowles merely replying to Rathburn's insistence that he did not care, and that she need not be so particular, by the tart inquiry, "Don't ye know dirt is pizen?" which choice axiom of toxicology he was at liberty to add to his store of scientific lore at his leisure. The reclaimed coffee-pot shone very cheerful as it sat, somewhat battered as to shape, upright on a trivet over the live coals; and it began almost straight-way to gurgle and to sing, and to give out a most refreshing fragrance. The fire seemed lean, somehow, after all its beds of ashes had been removed, for Mrs. Bowles sharply announced that she "warn't used to no such slack-twisted ways of keepin' a h'a'thstone," and wondered that he was not worse off than he was, being evidently of the opinion that the surplus of ashes was as pernicious to the health as Jake Baintree's bullet. The spare brightness of the flames illumined all the room; the radiance cheered him; the warmth was a luxury; and as he drank the coffee she brought him in a cup, also chastened with severe applications of soap and water, he looked at her with great gratitude, and declared that he could never thank her.

"Waal, now, don't ye *do* it!" she said, flashing her bright dark eyes at him, and showing all her fine teeth. She sat in one of the rickety chairs beside the hearth, resting from her culinary exertions; the tint of her crisp pink dress here and there deepened and paled as the glow of the fire rose and fell; her face, still shaded by the pink sun-bonnet, was a trifle flushed, and its plump curves were illumined by the glancing light. A placid content rested upon her features. A cultured criticism could never have deemed her beautiful, but she seemed a well-favored creature, pleasing to look upon, and of the kindest expression. She had not at first impressed Rathburn thus, and he wondered at it as he lay

comforted and tended, and enjoying the fire, and the cleanly aspect of things, and the good coffee, and the cheerful sight of her. In truth a change had been wrought in Mrs. Bowles's outlook at life within the last hour. It is a truism that all is for the best, but we accept it in exactly the proportion in which the dispensation adjusts itself to the requirements of our scheme of things. Mrs. Bowles found it easier to recognize the utility in Rathburn's misfortunes than the sufferer himself might have readily been brought to do. The fact that her benign ministrations to the wounded man, at the brink of starvation, would be noised abroad throughout Broomsedge Cove, the excitement and sensation that so unusual an incident as her discovery of Baintree's victim in the nick of time would necessarily rouse, must serve to mitigate any harsh criticism of her conduct to the fugitive Bob, if not altogether to nullify it. Possibly her absence from home in the guise of good Samaritan would suffice to explain any commotion in the deserted domestic sphere, even Bob's flight itself. No one need know which had first left the roof. Her eyes, full of forecast, were on the floor. Her lips were adjusted primly as the words were dumbly fashioned upon them. "I reckon Bob mus' hev strayed off through sarchin' fur me," — she fancied herself thus accounting for the incident. What more natural to say and to credit? Rathburn's self-esteem had been grievously cut down of late, but even in its reduced estate he could never have dreamed that the chief significance of Baintree's crime and his own deep wounds could be to any one merely the means of innocuously accounting for the small Bob Bowles's flight from his home. He had not yet finished his coffee. He was too feeble to take more than a few swallows at long intervals. Mrs. Bowles fixed her eyes upon him from time to time, evidently expecting that he would hand back the cup, and waiting to wash it. In the mean while she renewed her canvass of the place. "I 'low ez Jake Baintree mought hev been sati'fied 'thout turn-

in' the furniture topsy-turvy," she commented upon the overturned table. She rose as she spoke and righted the article in question, gathering up the fragments of bread and the broken crockery, and going to the door to throw them out. "I'd like ter sweep this hyar floor. I reckon the dust would n't choke ye much." She spoke in a tone that curiously partook of a demand as of a right, and yet of a request as for a favor. She gazed searchingly into the corners. "Laws-a-massy!" she cried, her voice striking the high key of mingled surprise and ridicule. "I don't believe the man hev so much ez got a broom!"

Albeit this praiseworthy intention was thus frustrated, she still dwelt upon the incidents of the floor. "Air that Baintree's shootin'-iron?" she asked, with knitted brows, as she noted the revolver.

"No, mine," said Rathburn.

"Did you-uns shoot back?" demanded Mrs. Bowles judicially, evidently not to be prejudiced against the absent Baintree.

"I?" exclaimed Rathburn. "I was asleep."

Mrs. Bowles turned suddenly pale. "Ye war n't a-fightin'?" she asked, amazed.

"I tell you I was asleep," said Rathburn angrily, the blood rising to his face. "We had had a quarrel" —

"What about?" interrupted Mrs. Bowles, eagerly relishing gossip so highly flavored, so fraught with danger, as this.

Rathburn was nothing loath. His attack upon Baintree seemed so small a matter in comparison with the dastardly crime which his enemy had committed that he had lost all the sense of humiliation, of repentance, that had so oppressed him. "Why, I made him tell me where that man Samuel Keale lost his life. That's where I believe silver is to be found."

Mrs. Bowles glanced over her shoulder with a gleam of scornful laughter. All unmindful, Rathburn went on: —

"I choked him till he told me. He would n't tell me till I had half choked the life out of him."

"They say they can't try him no mo' fur that nohow," she said. "I dunno what ails him ter be so tongue-tied 'bout'n it now. Whar war the place?" she queried, in sheer curiosity. She evidently attached little importance to his answer. She cared naught for justice in the abstract, and she had no special enmity toward Baintree. She leaned forward after she had spoken, and mended the fire, which was beginning to show a tendency to smoke.

"That's the queerest turn of all," said Rathburn. A gleam of excitement shone in his eyes. "He tracked this man Keale to a cave; he never saw him again. There were the prints of feet about the place, and the cave was on Teck Jepson's land."

The half-burned fagot fell from Mrs. Bowles's hand with a sharp crash upon the hearth; the smoke curled out into the room unheeded. Still bending over the fire, she turned her head and fixed upon him excited eyes, in which suspicion smouldered. "Teck Jepson!" she cried. "His bones hid in a cave on Jepson's land! No wonder the jury floundered an' the law failed! Jepson! ah—h!" Her eyes narrowed and her lip curled. "I'll be bound Teck Jepson hed a hand in Keale's takin'-off; ennybody mought hev suspicioned it — ah—h!"

"I never said that," stipulated Rathburn warily, animated by that reluctance felt by all civilized men to unnecessarily assume responsibility. "I only know that I forced Baintree to tell where the place was, — fairly choked the words out of him; and because I declared that I would search that cave of Jepson's he shot me while I was asleep, and left me for dead — with my own revolver. Why, this old thing," he said, clasping its handle, "I could n't tell when it has been discharged. He had to clean it — rusty old" —

"Put it down, — put it down!" cried Mrs. Bowles, with an unwonted show of timidity, and shrinking back against the jamb of the chimney. "I can't abide them bob-tailed shootin'-irons, — I can't place no dependence in 'em like



rifles ; they look ter me ez ef they 'd ez soon go off ez not, an' a leetle ruther."

Rathburn had ceased to meddle with the "bob-tailed shootin'-iron," and went on: "He not only shot me twice, so determined was he to have me silenced and dead and out of the way, but long afterward — the next day, or the next — he came there to that slit in the window, to look in and make sure that he had done his work thoroughly."

Mrs. Bowles turned half-way round in her chair, and fixed her dilated, startled eyes upon the crevice, as if she expected to see the long, keen, narrow face, with its furtive, crafty glance, peering through. "I lay as stiff and as rigid as a corpse could," Rathburn went on. "I'll bet you there was a glaze on my eyes, half shut I held 'em — What's the matter? Where are you going?" he broke off suddenly.

For Mrs. Bowles had risen so precipitately, with so wild an aspect, that despite the stiff neatness of her starched pink skirts and sun-bonnet she seemed suddenly disheveled. Her face was blanched, her eyes moved restlessly about. "Oh, my Lord!" she exclaimed, "I mus' be a-goin' — I mus' be a-gittin' away from hyar — I — I — I'm 'feard o' Jake Baintree."

"One minute, — wait one minute!" cried Rathburn, lifting himself upon his elbow, dismayed by the result of his graphic description of Baintree's visit. "He only came once, — that is, so far as I know ; he is n't likely to come again ; he has probably left the country."

"Shucks!" Mrs. Bowles summarily and contemptuously disposed of his logic, her suave graces and benign ministering disposition dispersing in thin air before the approach of personal danger. "Ef what he hev told 'bout that thar cave on Teck Jepson's land be wuth killin' you-uns 'bout, it air wuth killin' me too, an' his comin' back shows he air powerful partic'lar 'bout'n his job. Leastwise I ain't goin' ter resk his comin' back agin an' murderin' me hyar." As her roving eye fell upon him, seeing his pain, his terrible

straits, all expressed in his face, she recoiled a trifle before their dumb, unconscious, pallid reproach. "I have got a fambly dependin' on me," she said justifying her care for personal safety. She spoke with flabby white lips, and her eyes still maintained their hasty, restless movements.

"Oh, you're all right," Rathburn made haste to stipulate; the touch of satire in his voice was so light as to be almost unappreciable. "Altogether a matter of choice. Each for one's self, and devil take the hindmost."

"I'll put this bread an' water whar ye kin git it, an' pile up some wood hyar so ez ye kin make a fire."

"When I am able," he seemed to assent.

"An' " — she turned upon him her disingenuous eyes — "I'll tell the folks in the Cove whar ye be, an' send some of 'em after ye."

He could not have explained how he knew it so definitely, he pretended to no gift of forecast, but he was sure that her lips would be sealed so far as the tragedy in the deserted mountain hut was concerned; that she would not dare to overtly frustrate Baintree's vengeance, since he was at large and bent upon it, or to aid to fix his crime upon him. She would send no help. She would ostensibly hope that he might recover, but feel that it was the solution of a dangerous perplexity if he should die, realize how much she had done for his comfort, and reflect that in no event was it any affair of hers.

"If it would take no more time, I'd thank you instead to buckle the girth of the saddle about that gray mare of mine, and hitch her bridle to the ring at the door. I may take a little ride to-day. Oh, I'm a great deal stronger than you think." He smiled affably to meet her dismayed glance.

She stood motionless, doubting and deliberating. He looked like death; but he was a physician, — he had told her this, — and he was a better judge of his strength than she. She could not retrieve the fact that she had been here

and become cognizant of Baintree's crime, thereby incurring danger from him, and this Rathburn might detail whenever liberated. If perchance he should ride boldly down into the Cove, — it seemed impossible, — the story of her desertion of him in such a time of need would furnish a terrible supplement as well as convincing proof of any deductions of cruelty to the fugitive Bob. Without this incident, indeed, Bob's flight could hardly be innocuously passed over.

He could not understand the change in her face ; it brightened with sudden resolution.

"Why, to be sure I kin," she said cordially. "An' mebbe ye kin kem right along down the mounting arter me inter the Cove. I'd wait fur ye, 'ceptin' I be 'bleeged ter look arter that leetle boy o' mine ; it pesters me mightily ter hev ter leave ye, an ef 't war n't ez I be bound ter go down inter the Cove I'd ax ye ter kem an' bide at my house."

It assuaged her discontent in some sort to be able to go through this form of hospitality, meaningless as it was, for nothing could have induced her to harbor a man with a dangerous secret like this, and whose death Jake Baintree, already red-handed, sought.

"Thank you very much," Rathburn said civilly, but glad to show his independence. "I reckon I had better go to the Cove, to some friends I have there, — the Strobe family. I know they will take me in."

She once more remembered his ecstatic cry of "Marcella!" when she first stood in the door. She grudged a guest of this quality to the Strobes, albeit she had no wish to open her own house. She supposed it possible that they had made his acquaintance through Eli's machinations with the strings of government. She had always believed that there was much social advantage in politics. Being so debarred, she was keener of perception in this regard, and quicker to appraise such opportunities than most of the mountaineers.

She carried these thoughts with her while she buckled

the saddle-girth about the mare, glancing fearfully ever and anon over her shoulder at the gray solitudes glooming round. If he were strong enough to reach the Cove, he would compass this without her aid, and would have much of her dereliction to report. If he were not strong enough, he would die by the way, and thus would tell no secrets, either of the crime that Jake Baintree had committed, or of the knowledge of it that she reluctantly possessed. The mare was a tall beast, frisky and fat, and unused to being handled by women. She lowered her head and flung up her heels as the pink skirts swayed about her hoofs, but bridled and saddled she was at last, and the hitching rein was slipped through the ring on the door.

Mrs. Bowles was a little hasty in her leave-taking. "I'll tell the Strobes they mought ez well look out ter see ye, eh?" she called through the half-open door.

"If you will oblige me," he responded in turn.

There was naught of offense in the tone and the words, but her face was lowering beneath her jaunty pink-head-gear as she once more slipped her foot in the stirrup, glad enough to feel it there again, and mounted into her worn old side-saddle. "Perliteness is on his lips, but not in his heart," she said bitterly, for there are none who so resent insincerity as the insincere.

As she jogged off down the bridle-path, she noted the threatening aspect of the day. All above the circling sombre purple mountains, on every side, darkening clouds hung in sinister abeyance. Below in the Cove, the stretches of the broomsedge flared, in its tawny ruddy tint the only suggestion of sunshine in the landscape; where the forests intervened, the thickly massed myriads of bare boughs, even the heavily draped branches of the pines, were null as to color, and lurked darkling in the valleys, intensifying the great gloom of the scene. Only far away could she see lighter tints, albeit of a gray diffusiveness, and this was along the summit of a distant range, where the nebulosity of the cloud

had been resolved into vague slanting lines intimating rainfall. The weather could hardly be more unpropitious for her journey to the Cove, but with the recent events in the forlorn little shanty in mind, with the terror of the possible propinquity of the murderous Baintree lurking in the wintry woods somewhere, she did not hesitate, she had no wish to linger. Only once she looked back: when she had progressed so far down the descent, at a thumping, lunging walk, — for her horse had a gait unique in its way, especially adapted to these precipitous descents and slippery verges of the Great Smoky, — that another turn amongst the leafless wands of the undergrowth would conceal the house from view, she halted for a moment, and glanced over her shoulder. The ragged, bare slope of the mountain stretched high above; amongst the leafless boughs of the gnarled old trees, imposed in definite lines against the slate-tinted sky, she saw the wreathing blue smoke of the fire she had made, and beneath the branches at the end of the vista, the little hut, the oblique line of the gray roof cut sharply against the sombre purple masses of a neighboring mountain visible across the valley. The door was shut, and there rode down the path, mounted upon the gray mare, an emaciated figure, with a face all pallid and ghostly in the dim light of the day; and Mrs. Bowles, although unimaginative, received a terrible suggestion of the Biblical Death upon the pale horse, as the rider came swaying in the saddle between the slate-colored clouds and the purple-black mountains in those forlorn altitudes, where solitude possessed the wilderness and the storm impended.

“He can’t keep the saddle fur haffen the way,” she said to herself.

Then she turned, and urged her horse down and down the descent, losing as she went, being considerably in advance, the sound of the hoofs that followed.

## XXVI.

THE gilded squares of light that the windows of Eli Strobe's cabin showed in the outer darkness were hardly obstructed by the growth about them, so leafless had it all become. To be sure, here was the outline of a rosebud, sketched in a clear bronze in many-branched grace upon the yellow space, and at the other window a series of straight wands rose up above the sill, and betokened the withered estate of the "sweet Betty" bushes. Nevertheless, from afar off Mrs. Bowles could see the squares illuminated on the purplish blackness of the night, and they served beacon-wise to guide her along the dark reaches of the road, still reeking with the heavy rainfall, not long overpast, and intimated very definitely where she must turn aside to take the marshy turn-row in lieu of the red clay highway. She shrank from the open doors of the forge, seeing in the red flare from within the figures of the blacksmith's cronies and hearing their loud hilarious voices, for the consciousness that Rathburn followed hard upon her steps induced an unwonted caution. If he had quarreled with Baintree, it was possible that he had other enemies as well; and remembering how wild of aim are the bullets in a free fight, and that a stray shot might be endowed with pernicious possibilities, she forbore, as far as she might, attracting the attention of those within. She passed as silently as a shadow in the multitudinous shadows of the night, the hoof-beats of her horse hardly audible in the deep mire on one side of the road. She was sure that a horseman whom she suddenly encountered, galloping, was altogether unaware of her proximity, as he shot by in the gloom. He had come from the turn-row that

led through the fields to Eli Strobe's house, and she wondered a little wistfully at this. "Some o' thar everlastin' visitors, through cousin Eli bein' sech a busybody in politics," she thought, remembering the social advantages of candidacy.

But they were not the cheerful faces which behoove an open house that came trooping out to the door when her incongruous feminine "Halloo!" weakly quavering from its soprano shrillness to an abashed silence, roused all the surprised inmates.

"Laws-a-massy, M'ria Bowles!" exclaimed Mrs. Strobe, with her hand over her eyes, peering intently into the long shafts of light fluctuating out into the darkness from the lantern that Eli Strobe carried in his hand. "Mighty glad ter see ye, M'ria, enny time ye kem, though ye mighty nigh skeered me out'n seven years' growth, an' I never hed much growth ter be skeered out'n," remarked the little dame at long range, as Mrs. Bowles dismounted upon the horse-block and started up the path to the house, leaving the hitching-rein in the hands of her host. Even in the dim radiance of the shifting lantern and the gleam from the open door, her pink skirts rustled with much of their pristine stiffness, despite the dank atmosphere, the legacy of the storm.

"Ef she war dead, she'd 'pear at the gates o' heaven all fraish from the ironin'-board," Mrs. Strobe commented in a low tone to Marcella. "Her affection fur the sad-iron an' the washboard air all that M'ria Bowles ever showed ter prove she hed a heart. Some wimmen, though, ain't got so much ez that."

"Did ye kem down hyar ter git shet o' the storm, M'ria?" she called aloud, for she could not allay her curiosity concerning so untimely a visit. "I see ye hain't been in the rain."

"Naw, cousin J'rushy," Mrs. Bowles replied, with an exceeding gravity, coming, out of breath, up the steps, her plump olive cheeks, her bead-like eyes, her flexible lips, all

adjusted to an appreciation of importance. "I war n't out in the storm," she continued, mingling her account of herself with her greetings, which gave them a cavalier air, implying a preoccupied mind, which Marcella and Isabel visibly resented, their added pride of bearing perceptible even in their silence. "I rid my beastis inter a sorter niche in the rocks whilst the rain war fallin', kase I did n't want ter git wet myself, an' I hed a man along o' me ez war powerful ailin' through bein' shot."

Eli Strobe paused, hearing the last statement as he came up the steps, and flashed the light of the lantern into her face. It revealed the pompous dignity of his own. He frowned down this affront to the law, caring far less for the victim than for its majesty. He cast his lowering side-glance upon her. "Who done it?" he demanded gruffly.

"Jake Baintree," she said.

She did not note how Eli Strobe winced. He had sought to lend his personal strength and influence to the feeble law which he was commissioned to administer, had upheld the justice of the verdict that had liberated Baintree, and had subsequently given him countenance. It seemed ill enough deserved, and for a man who piqued himself upon discrimination and consistency this was a blow.

"Yes, sir; shot him an' lef' him for dead in the old Pinnett cabin. An' bein' ez I passed by, I fund him starved an' 'thout no fire, an' the floor lookin' like it hed *never* been swep'." Mrs. Bowles set her lips primly. "So I jes' holped him on his mare an' fetched him down the mounting with me." The sound of a hoof smote her ear, and she turned suddenly. "Thar he be now at the gate."

Rathburn, his every faculty jaded, his bones sore from the jolting of the journey, his wound poignantly aching, as he drew rein at last, had only an indistinct impression of glowing stationary lights a-bloom in the utter blackness, seeming to shed presently, as a petal, a fluctuating golden flake, dandering down the currents of the wind blowing



toward him. His dazed senses took heed of it at last as Eli Strobe's prosaic lantern. He felt the mountaineer's strong arms encircle him as he lay, bending forward on the mare's neck, — for he could no longer sit upright, — and draw him out of the saddle, and carry him to the house almost as helpless as a child. He smelled, as he went, the dank mould of the autumnal borders, where all the flowers had gone to seed. He heard a detached pattering, a mere *ap-poggiatura* of musical drops falling from one of the stiff, sere, brown things, not recognizable in its wizened, wisp-like guise. The skeleton vines flapped about the porch; he saw the lights through them as they swayed, and then his consciousness failed for a time.

When he knew himself again he was stretched upon a lounge, drawn up at one side of a hearth upon which even Mrs. Bowles's broom could find no field of action. He tasted the strong flavor of the unadulterated mountain whiskey; it brought the tears to his eyes, and feeling the glow kindling in every chilled member, he was moved to marvel how much of the potent liquid Mrs. Strobe had assumed the responsibility of administering. For they were all sitting in a circle about the hearth, except Marcella, who knelt, holding one hand before her face to shield her flushed cheek from the flames, while she turned, with a long fork, the broiling venison upon the coals, from which an appetizing odor rose. She did not look up, although a general exclamation of satisfaction greeted his opening eyes.

"I thunk the reverend stuff would fetch ye," observed Mrs. Strobe triumphantly, as if she had invented the remedy. "I'm goin' ter gin ye some yerb-tea," she added benignly.

And then it dawned upon Rathburn that he had fallen into the practice of this ambitious amateur.

"Oh, I don't want any herb-tea," he declared with decision.

"Jes' like Dr. Boyce, — pore old man, ez bald-headed ez

a aig." This ridicule seemed irrelevant, but the tone was a great power of depreciation. "*He* don't want no yerb-tea, nuther."

Rathburn had lifted himself on his arm. "Does he — this physician — live near here? Could we send him word to-morrow to come and see me?"

"Listen at him!" cried Mrs. Strobe, with an ebullition of laughter. "That jes' shows how much ye know, — how much of a doctor-man ye be, sure enough. Mighty willin' ter try yer ignorunce a-dosin' other folks, an' — chuck-a-luck! — git well or die. But ef ye air a-ailin' yerse'f, nare doctor-man' mongst ye air willin' ter take his own med'cine, — rank pizen, — what he administers so free ter other folks." She cocked her head on one side and surveyed him speculatively. "I s'pose now, ef Dr. Boyce war ailin', he 'd want some other doctor ter physic him ez knowed more 'n hisself. That man oughter be powerful easy fund! I'll bet ye a cow an' calf he could n't be got ter swaller the ill-smellin' lotiums he gins other folks 'thout ye war ter hold his nose an' tie his hands ahint his back."

At this graphic account of the fraternal interdependence of the profession Rathburn could but smile.

"Now," exclaimed Mrs. Strobe cheerily, "ye look sorter like yerse'f, — some sorter like ye did that las' night ye war down hyar. I reckon ye hev hed yer fill o' sarchin' fur silver with sech ez Jake Baintree."

"I have indeed."

"Ef I hed n't happened ter kem along he 'd hev been dead," said Mrs. Bowles plaintively, as she sat and sipped a cup of coffee; for the regular supper being some time ago concluded, the refreshments were served to the travelers thus informally about the hearth.

"I have no doubt of it. I have a great deal to thank Mrs. Bowles for."

Mrs. Strobe's little cynical squawk interrupted these amenities. "Laws-a-massy! Air Mis' Bowles the n'angel

ez ye said delivered ye afore, whenst ye got inter a pickle with the mounting folks? A n'angel! I would never hev tuk ye fur sech, M'ria! I 'low ye weigh more 'n a n'angel ginerally do, though mebbe ye air a n'angel ez hev been fattened up by high livin'."

A certain smirking bewilderment was on Mrs. Bowles's round face. She was at first not disposed to repudiate the compliment, losing sight, in her confusion, of the fact that Rathburn surely knew to whom he had paid it. Then her cheek mantled with a glow of resentment because of Mrs. Strobe's allusion to her avoirdupois, which was no more than might conveniently grace a plump angel; and it was Mrs. Bowles's firm conviction that heaven was not full of slim divinities, — "scraggy," she called them, — like Marcella Strobe, who looked as if she might break in two.

"I 'lowed, too," said Mrs. Strobe, settling her feet on the rung of her chair, where she perched with an air as if she would flit away presently, and delighting in the confusion wrought by her sarcasm, — "I 'lowed, Eugene Rathburn, ez ye 'd be too perlite ter call a *married* lady a n'angel, even ef she *did* warn ye from the lynch-ers an' save yer life."

Mrs. Bowles changed color quickly. The word "lynch-ers" smote terror to her heart. Not for any consideration would she incur the suspicion of having interfered between the wild, lawless mountain vigilantes and their intended victim; no suave delights of hyperbolic praises could avail for an instant.

"'T war n't *me*, cousin J'rushy. *Naw'm!*" with emphasis. "I never seen that thar man till this very mornin', — never set eyes on him. I war glad ter help him ter kem away from whar he war bound ter starve, but I don't want ter be called no n'angel," she added primly.

"How would cherubim do, then, or seraphim?" demanded Mrs. Strobe seriously, despite the whimsical corrugations about the small drawn mouth. The quality of her wit was disconcerting, and as Mrs. Bowles turned her reddening face

aside her eye fell on Marcella. The girl had risen, and was standing partly in the shadow of the mantel-piece ; the breath of the fire still fanned the soft masses of her curling hair tossed backward on her shoulders ; her oval face was delicately flushed ; her eyes, from under their long poetic lashes, shone like stars. The effect of this luminous head from out the soft nullity of the brown shadows about it, that canceled its more prosaic environment, might have impressed far less alert perceptions than Mrs. Bowles possessed. It never would have occurred to her to characterize it as ethereal or unearthly, but the jealousy of her temperament was vigilant enough to recognize a possible applicability of the phrase and to grudge it. For Mrs. Bowles was jealous on principle ; not that she coveted Rathburn's devotion for herself, but it irked her that Marcella should receive this homage, or that indeed anything generally esteemed of worth, whether she herself truly accounted it of value or not, should be at her option. She had looked upon herself so long as a sacrifice in some inexplicable sort to duty that she was prone to account each grace of person, each opportunity of position, as an advantage wrested from her and her inalienable right. To be sure, Mrs. Bowles could not have logically defended this claim of holding a patent upon beauty and charm. It was enough that she chose to maintain it. Her bead-like eyes suddenly glowed, as she looked askance at the girl, who grew hardly less attractively human in leaving the angelic effects of the shadows, and coming out into the light bearing the little blue bowl full of broth.

Rathburn looked up at her with his face irradiated, as he lifted himself to a half-sitting posture. His glance met with slight response ; the expression seemed suddenly expunged from her eyes as they encountered his. They were bright as ever, it is true, but blankly indifferent, and presently averted.

He gazed questioningly, pleadingly, at her, but she did not look at him again, and after he had drunk the broth he

sank back amongst the pillows, more definitely aware than before of his pain, the jeopardy of his wound, and his reduced estate.

"An' how do you-uns kem on, cousin Eli?" asked Mrs. Bowles, shifting her chair slightly, and turning to her host, who sat, with his hat on his head, his hands on either knee, his eyes on the glowing coals.

Mrs. Strobe looked keenly watchful. Marcella paused as she was going out of the door with the emptied bowl in her hand, and turned back. Quick as they were, they could not forestall a deep groan that suddenly burst from his lips as from a surcharged heart.

"Oh, powerful bad off, cousin M'ria. I be mightily troubled, — mightily troubled."

Mrs. Strobe broke into a laugh, seemingly the essence of light-hearted gayety, albeit her small, keen eyes burned like coals of fire. Marcella came back to the hearth, showing her face in the radiance with a gallant smile upon her trembling lips.

"Law, dad," she exclaimed in a tone of rallying mirth, "ye would n't think nuthin' o' tricks an' the wiles o' yer p'litical enemies ef ye hed yer health right good. They know they can't beat ye at the polls, — ye jes' stan' solid with the people, — so they hev ter try ter yank ye out'n yer office some other way."

"Laws-a-massy, what air they a-tryin' ter do?" demanded Mrs. Bowles, with a lively curiosity. Trouble was evidently a-stalk in the Cove, and gave its denizens many a twinge of anguish, although she had latterly felt as if the wellnigh inaccessible slopes of the mountain were exclusively its bailiwick. She experienced a certain reconciliation with her own lot in the knowledge that others were unhappy too.

"That 's jes' like Eli, — he always war slow, sence he war knee-high ter a duck," said his small mother, with an affectation of contempt. "Time he hev hed a day or so ter study 'bout it, an' turn it this-a-way an' that-a-way, he 'll git

ter the p'int o' view whar Marcelly an' me jumped in one second. Men air pitiful critters, — so slow-minded ! ”

Eli Strobe looked wistfully from one to the other of his feminine supporters, eager to adopt their sanguine views, and yet unable to repudiate his own conviction and to shake off the palsy of his fears.

“ Now, M'ria, ye mark my words, — an' ye too, Eugene,” the little dame proceeded with great jocularly, as if the whole matter were a subject for mirth, — “ ef by ter-morrer Eli won't be a-struttin' 'bout hyar, a-laffin' an' a-chucklin' at Joshua Nevins's friends ez could n't keep Eli from bein' elected constable o' Brumsaidge Cove, but think they kin make out ez he ain't fit ter hold office, bein' insane ! Ha ! ha ! ha ! ”

Even Mrs. Bowles, after a moment of stupefied surprise, burst into a laugh of derision. Strobe turned and eagerly gazed at her, as if to assure himself of her opinion of his sanity, taking testimony, as it were, in his own trial of himself.

“ Yes, sir ! ” said Mrs. Strobe, wiping from her eyes the tears of this laughter on the corner of her apron. “ The off'cer o' the law hev jes' been hyar, a-gallopin' ter sarve a notice ez in five days they hev a ‘inquisition o' lunacy,’ the fool called it. *He* looked like a maniac, so foolish, an' cast down, an' bashful ; hed n't the face ter take a drink with Eli, though I fetched out the jimmyjohn expressly.”

“ Air it Nevins hisself a-suin', or what air he a-aimin' ter do, — a brazen-faced buzzard ? ” demanded Mrs. Bowles in eager accents.

“ Naw, — naw ! ” The old woman shook her head warily to intimate Nevins's crafty mode of procedure. “ The man ez applied for the inquisition air some sorter kin ter Eli. Ye 'member hearin' o' Pete Minton, ez old Squair Denly lef' some county bonds ter ? Waal, 'cordin' ter the will, Eli, bein' named arter him, war ter hev the interus' through life ; then arterward the bonds war ter go ter Pete, the Squair's nevy, an' Eli war Pete's gardeeen. Now Minton,

ez air twenty year old, purtends ter be mighty oneasy 'bout them bonds, an' wants the court ter 'quire inter Eli's bein' able ter manage this prawperty. Course he hev been put up ter sech by Nevins, kase ef the inquisition war ter 'low ez Eli be insane they mought git up a new 'lection, an' ef Eli war out'n the way Nevins would hev a walk-over an' strut around, an' be constable of Brumsaidge!"

"That he never shell!" cried the incumbent, springing to his feet. "I hev been man enough ter git the office, — I reckon I be man enough ter hold it. M'ria," — his voice suddenly dropped from its rotund resonance to an appealing quaver, — "did you-uns ever hear ez Teck Jepson war dead, — ez I hed killed him?"

"Laws-a-massy, naw!" cried Mrs. Bowles, her face flabby and white. "*When?*"

Rathburn's heart ached as he looked at Marcella. He saw the pain in her eyes; the suffusing flush mounted to her white brow, but she tossed back her bright hair, and her red lips parted in a cheery half smile over her white teeth as she explained: —

"Dad say somebody tole him — he disremembers now who 't war — ez Teck Jepson war killed in that scuffle at the horse-race, ez dad killed Teck. An' I fooled dad some, too." Her eyes danced, her laughter rang out. "*I* tole him whar Teck war buried. An' ef ye 'll b'lieve me, dad *b'lieved* it, an' I hearn him 'quirin roun' one day ez ter who hed preached the fun'el sermon. Granny said that 's what the folks purtend he air crazy 'bout."

Once more her laughter rang out clear and metallic. It had a natural enough sound to Mrs. Bowles, who joined in, while Mrs. Strobe, with her birdlike head askew, remarked, "Eli air so sobersided he 'll b'lieve mos' ennything ennybody tells him with a straight face. He *mus'* be a leetle teched in the head fur that, kase long ez I hev been livin' I hain't hearn the truth tole in Brumsaidge Cove but wunst or twict, an' *then* 't war 'bout the weather."

Strobe listened with an eagerness to be convinced pathetic in its intensity. Rathburn watched the symptoms of his mania vacillating with his ambition, and his sense of the jeopardy of his precious office, with an appreciation of the pathological significance of the scene which even sympathy with the actors could not altogether dull. Perhaps something of this showed in his face, turned fixedly upon Eli Strobe, as the burly constable, moody and meditative, evidently puzzling out the distraught contradictions of his convictions, relapsed into silently gazing into the fire.

Marcella was sitting in a low chair beside the lounge, stringing red peppers, her evening task, when Mrs. Bowles began to explain to Mrs. Strobe how Bob had chanced to disappear from his home, — the exposition somewhat complicated and lengthened by the perception that her craft availed little, and that behind Mrs. Strobe's specious politeness lurked an accurate divination of the true state of the case. Twice while it was in progress Rathburn fell under the impression that Marcella was about to speak to him; but when he turned his head suddenly toward her, her eyes were downcast upon the work in her hands, the firelight dancing over the masses of her waving hair, and giving an added gloss and an intenser glow to the vivid scarlet of the string of red pepper pods trailing over her dark, brownish-green dress. And again his attention reverted to his host, sitting ponderously thoughtful before the fire. When he next started with the idea that she was about to speak, he encountered her lustrous brown eyes fixed upon him; the delicate red lips were a-quiver; her straight brows were knitted sternly. "Ain't ye sati'fied *yit*," she demanded in a low voice, that, albeit tense with satire, was inaudible to the gabbling Mrs. Bowles, still explaining Bob's flight, "but ye mus' stare-gaze him ter find out suthin' else ter tell?"

He was feeble, and had had much to endure. His courage failed on the instant before the idea of her antagonism.

"Why, Marcella!" he cried, amazed.



She reached down for another pepper-pod, not lowering her gleaming eyes. "Would n't ye like ter feel his pulse? Mebbe ye could gin the inquisition folks another p'int or two!"

"What do you mean?" he demanded, forced to assume the defensive. "I never gave any points for the inquisition."

"Who tole on him, then? Who but ye hed larnin' enough ter sense how his mind air catawampus jes' on that idee, an' no other?"

"I? Never — never!" he exclaimed, so visibly shocked that his face constrained credence as well as his words.

She sat looking at him, holding the vivid coils of the peppers in her idle hands.

"Then," she said, darkly frowning, "'t war Andy Longwood. I always knowed he war silly ez a sheep, but I thunk ez harmless ez a sheep."

After a little she raised her eyes and smiled brilliantly at him, as if to make amends. She said no more, but as she strung the peppers silently listened to Mrs. Bowles, who now and then called on Rathburn to confirm her statements as to the plight in which she had found him. She met with a spirited response. Comfort and security did not annul in any degree his appreciation of his injuries or his suffering. The detail of all that he had recounted to Mrs. Bowles elicited from time to time exclamations of surprise and horror, often but half articulate, from Mrs. Strobe and Eli. Marcella once or twice commented more at length. "Did ye choke Baintree — *hard*, sure enough — jes' kase he would n't tell ye whar the silver war?" she asked, her brilliant, dilated eyes dreamily fastened on space, evidently witnessing the scene reenacted before her in imagination. Her hands had fallen idly in her lap; the scarlet coil of the red peppers hung from her listless grasp, and trailed upon the floor.

"Indeed I did," asseverated Rathburn. "He had no right to fool me as he did all the summer."

"'T war *his* secret," Marcella suggested in a vague, pre-

occupied tone, still doubtfully staring into scenes that her own fancy painted. "He hed a right ter keep it."

"And such a secret!" cried Rathburn, with a curling lip. "He never found the float. Samuel Keale found the float."

"An'," said Mrs. Bowles, lowering her voice mysteriously, "whar d'ye reckon he fund it, an' whar d'ye reckon his bones be hid now? In a cave on Teck Jepson's land, an' — ye mark my words — Teck Jepson hed some hand in puttin' him thar."

A galvanic shock seemed to pervade the circle. Then Marcella's laughter rang upon the air. "Never in this worl'," she cried gayly, composedly gathering up the long red cables of the peppers. "Teck Jepson never hid nuthin' he done. He'd hev been struttin' 'roun' hyar, callin' on folks ter admire how much his actions war like David, or Sol'mon, or G'liath, or somebody ez the law ain't 'quainted with, an' he'd hev been powerful s'prised when the sher'ff did n't 'gree with him." Once more the incongruity of the idea elicited a peal of laughter. "Naw, Teck Jepson air too sodden in pride ter hide what *he* do."

As Mrs. Bowles began to eagerly set forth further reasons, reminding Mrs. Strobe of Jepson's antagonism to Keale, Rathburn spoke aside in a low tone to Marcella.

"You were quick enough to believe something mean of me," he said reproachfully, "but you scout the idea of Jepson's doing anything underhand."

He expected her to protest. She only stared at him for a moment, startled, with wide, questioning eyes and a convicted mien. Then she fell to dreamily studying the vermillion coals and the gathering gray ash, and said little more, while the group of gossips drew nearer and nearer the dying fire.

She was meditative and absent during the days that followed, save in the intervals when she intently marked her father's manner and took heedful note of his words. For

Mrs. Strobe's prophecy was in some sort verified. With greater familiarity with the idea that his cherished office was threatened came the resolution of resistance. Strobe had rallied his courage. He bore himself once more with his former burly dignity.

"'T ain't nuthin' ter me whether Teck Jepson air dead or no. I ain't grave-digger, nor doctor, nor chief mourner. I'm constable o' Brumsaidge. I hearn fur news ez he war dead. Ef 't ain't true, I ain't keerin'."

Thus, imagining that he spoke of his independent convictions, he conned again and again the lesson his mother and daughter had set him to learn. Rathburn, still on the lounge drawn up to the side of the fire, in the midst of the domestic life, and thus suffering none of the dreary isolation of an invalid, felt his heart go out to the two women in troubled forebodings concerning the inquisition. They said little, but he noted an urgent anxiety as to the weather, and when the day broke chill and lowering their spirits visibly rose; in the afternoon, as the first snow of the season began to sift down on the wintry mountain wildernesses, they became absolutely cheerful.

"Thar, now! fallin' weather!" exclaimed Mrs. Strobe, with the accents of vexation and a triumphant eye. "Eli, I ain't goin' ter let ye go over yander ter the store whar the sher'ff's app'inted ter hold the inquisition; a man ailin' in health hev ter be housed in fallin' weather. Let him bring his able-bodied jury over hyar an' examine ye, an' hear mine an' Marcelly's testimony, 'cordin' ter the subpeeny. I'm going' ter send him that identical word, an' see ef he won't."

And thus it chanced that it was under no new conditions, surrounded by no scenes to which he was long unaccustomed, that Eli Strobe made his fight anew for the office he had already won, and the ambition dearer to him than his life.

## XXVII.

THE snow was deep upon the ground, drifts filled many a red clay gully, the dark boughs of the trees all bore a thick white line, the mountains were ghastly under a gray sky, and still the myriad flakes were falling, when the noiseless horsemen rode up to the door, and the jury of the inquisition came filing in. They met upon the threshold the subject of their deliberations, bluff, burly, with that genial political jocularly that discounts all other bids for popularity, his heavy bass laughter mingling with his gay greetings.

“Howdy, boys! Kem in, kem in! That’s right, — stomp the snow off! Ye know mam’s mighty partic’lar ’bout that thar new rag kyarpet o’ hern. Kem ter see ef I hev got a bee in my bonnet, hev ye? Waal, waal; we’ll listen ter hear that same bee buzz!”

The heavy mountaineers looked in blank surprise at each other. This discourse seemed to them lucid as reason itself. They had expected mere incoherent babbling, from the reports set a-flying about Broomsedge Cove. Marcella’s face, smiling yet with a certain proud defiance, and Mrs. Strobe’s jaunty, debonair salutation betokened scant anxiety, and did much to annul the effect of what they had heard. There were others besides the jury, — witnesses, one or two lawyers, and a number of mountaineers who were merely spectators of the proceeding; some of them wore a sheepish, hang-dog air, notably Andy Longwood and Pete Minton, at whose instance the investigation was had. Clem Sanders was one of the jury, as reluctant a freeholder as could be found in Broomsedge Cove, or, for the matter of that, in the Great

Smoky Mountains. He carried his shoulders slouched forward in the heavy, aged manner which he sometimes affected, and he shambled along as if shackled by chains of his own forging; he looked with humble, beseeching eyes at Marcella, as if conjuring her to observe that he was not there in any sense of his own motion.

"Kem up close by the fire, gentlemen," said Eli. "Airish out'n doors, ain't it?"

As they ranged themselves about the broad hearth, they were all staring hard at Rathburn, who lay quite silent, since his host did not explain his presence, wondering a trifle within himself to feel so agitated, so partisan, so eager as to the result of the investigations.

Sundry questions were put to Strobe, to which he listened with his head a trifle askew, his legs crossed, one hand on his knee, the other arm akimbo, his eyes quizzically glancing from under his hatbrim. His whole air was that of gay good-humor, falling in naturally with the current of events, and in no wise resentful of the course they had taken. The queries, chiefly relating to matters of business usage and of certain processes of the law, the functions of his office, were promptly and decisively answered. Once, Marcella, feigning to misunderstand their drift, handed him an open book, and the company enjoyed an exhibition of "dad's" rare accomplishment of reading, which he did in a full, rotund drone and with much vigor of emphasis. The girl's smile of triumph as she closed the volume and laid it on the high mantel-shelf roused a certain antagonism in the breasts of several of the diligent inquirers. There was a momentary pause; the batten shutter was open, the great glowing fire sufficiently warming the room although thus generously ventilated, and from where Marcella stood, her hand still on the high mantel-piece, she could see the silent flakes, falling, falling, limiting the world, — for hardly the nearest mountain was visible, — a mere dull, dun suggestion of wood and range and river, like the first faint washings of a scene

in sepia. No sound came from without, although nearly a score of horses stamped the snow in the shed behind the house. The dog of the "frequent visitor," a hospitable animal, stood in the doorway suavely wagging his tail, pleased to see so many guests at once. They were all looking with expectant interest at Marcella's face as the next question was asked; so fixedly that perhaps it was not unnatural that Eli Strobe should turn and follow the general glance. A smile dawned in her eyes as they met his, so replete with an exquisite light, and hope, and love, that had a sudden sun-burst illumined that white, dead day it could hardly have seemed brighter. It was a fine display of nerve, of will-power, Rathburn thought, knowing her as he did.

"How did ye git hurt, Mr. Strobe?" was the significant demand.

"Teck Jepson rid me down," said the constable, his eyes fixed on his daughter.

The circle of mountaineers slowly shifted their chairs, and one or two spit profusely into the fire, aiming carefully at long range.

"Did you-uns hurt him?"

Strobe fixed his gaze on the talismanic brightness of his daughter's eyes.

"Bein' ez I war knocked senseless, sir, I could n't onder-take ter say."

Another pause, so silent that naught could be heard save the roar of the flames in the wide chimney, and the foot-falls of the dog turning away and trotting along to the end of the porch, where he presently found entertainment, peculiarly pleasing to his kind, in barking in a frenzy of affection at the horses of the visitors.

"Did n't ye tell Andy Longwood one day ez ye hed killed Teck Jepson in that scuffle?"

"Sartainly I said so! Somebody tole me that fur news an' bein' ez I war knocked senseless, I disremembered what happened. An' this hyar mischievius gal o' mine, fur a

joke on her ole dad, tole me whar they hed buried him. I 'lowed they would n't hev buried him 'thout he war dead. Ha! ha! ha!" his burly bass laugh rang out.

Clem Sanders had plucked up his spirits. He looked about amongst his confrères with a curling lip of scorn. Andy Longwood hung his abashed head. The political antagonists of Eli Strobe were visibly disconcerted.

"Only one more question now: Hev ye seen Teck lately?"

Eli Strobe nodded.

"How did he look, an' what did he talk 'bout?"

"Toler'ble nat'ral, cornsiderin'." The long strain was beginning to tell on the constable's nerves. His glance had wandered from Marcella's face, out of which the light died suddenly, leaving it livid, with wild, dilated eyes. "Ye never would hev tuk him fur a harnt! He talked same ez ever, 'bout G'liath an' Sol'mon an' them, ez he used ter set sech store by."

There was a moment of terrible suspense to his mother and his daughter. Then the querist, evidently accepting the reply as partly jocose, and taken in connection with his previous denials and declarations as satisfactory, said, "That will do for you!"

Mrs. Strobe's admirable elasticity was amply demonstrated by her rebound from this ordeal. She furnished the jury with a test for sanity which they all declined to apply. When asked if she considered her son sane, she declared he was as sane as any man could be, but in her opinion no men were sane.

"I never seen one ez could thread a needle," she declared, with her specious gravity. "An' yit enny woman kin do that, an' kin do men's work too,—plow, an' drive, an' ride, an' shoot a gun. Nare one o' ye kin thread a needle. I'll try *ye*, sher'ff; I'll favor *ye* with a big-eyed needle an' a small, thin thread. I'll wax it," she conceded alluringly, reaching out for the big brown gourd that served as work-basket.

But the officer precipitately declined, and the examination broke up in a general laugh. After the jury had consulted apart and agreed upon their verdict, there was a more genial closing up of the circle about the fire. Mrs. Strobe and Marcella sat among the guests, indifferent to the conversation for a time and mentally exhausted. They perceived how signal a victory they had won against the facts and in defiance of the law, — hardly so potent a force as the crafty affection of a mother and a daughter, — and they experienced a glow of deep gratulation. But it was necessary to keep a guard upon Eli Strobe's words, and Marcella roused herself to listen as he made known to the coterie how Rathburn had fared at the hands of Jake Baintree, and the fact that the criminal had fled the country.

"Yestiddy I rid up ter his folkses' house, countin' on arrestin' him, bein' constable o' Brumsaidge," — he rolled the fine phrase under his tongue, — "an' his folks declared out they hed n't seen nor hearn o' him fur weeks. He done this crime jes' 'count o' Eugene Rathburn's makin' him tell whar Sam'l Keale los' his life, kase Eugene air mighty sharp set fur riches, an' he b'lieves the silver air thar in that cave on Jepson's land."

"I'll tell ye who hain't lef' the kentry," said Bassett, with a grim nod and a fiery eye, — "Teck Jepson. Air one o' you off'cers o' the law hev got my cornsent ter arrest Teck Jepson!"

Eli Strobe's eyebrows were lifted in surprise; his lips had parted, but the quick little mother struck in first: —

"Arrest Teck Jepson for what?"

"Let the sher'ff say." Bassett evaded a direct reply. "I seen him 'bout five days ago a-standin' in his porch, — 't war arter a heavy rain, — a-shakin' hands with this same man Baintree what he purtended wunst ter b'lieve so guilty, an' then purtected agin the lynchers, — *they say so*," he interpolated, becoming suddenly mindful of the significance of the presence of the sheriff, — "this man ez war tried fur



killin' Sam'l Keale ez be dead, an' his body hid all these years in a cave on Jepson's land. Shakin' hands with him, sir, ez ef they war partners, — an' I say they *war* partners ! ”

The officer turned a serious face. “ This must be investigated. I 'll go thar ter-night.”

“ Jepson oughter be 'rested, or he 'll foller Baintree, an' git away too. An' he mought be warned. Ye know ” — Bassett turned to Rathburn's couch — “ ye war warned yerse'f.”

Rathburn shifted his position a trifle. He was flushed and conscious. He hardly dared to glance at Marcella ; and when the firelight leaped u presently he saw that she had silently left the room. He was glad of that. In her presence he felt that he was not sure of keeping the secret of who had warned him under the lynx-eyed vigilance of these savage men, more than one of whom he suspected of belonging to the band of lynchers.

The night had come, — hardly to be called darkness, for the white earth seemed possessed of a pallid persistence that asserted itself against the gloom of the sky. And the sky was not all gloom. Behind the clouds a moon lurked ; now and then in thin folds of vapor showing a spectral, half-veiled face, and anon shifting along the highways of the skies, its presence barely suggested behind the denser mediums. A dreary night it seemed to Marcella. Never had she so revolted from the world. The great chestnut-tree at the gate was laden with snow ; every gnarled, twisted bough, how gaunt against the gray sky ! The zigzag rail fence was all made definite, too, by its alternations of white and black lines. Why should her hands be cold — so cold ? Had she not just come from the fire ? She felt its warmth still in the folds of her dress. And why should she shiver so ? She was choking, — a cord was stretched across her throat ; her heart was beating fast and loud. She presently recognized her intention in astonishment, as if it were

projected by another entity than herself. She was out among the horses. A score, at least, stood in her father's shed. One, a clean-built black mare, turned a shapely head, and gazed at her in surprise with luminous, moonlit eyes, for the moon was suddenly shining, and many a shadow was on the snow. She slipped under the neck of a raw-boned bay, who snorted and tossed up his head in fright. The fleetest, — the fleetest she must have, and her eyes dilated as she stood next a powerful iron-gray, full of spirit, that shied away as she caught his mane with one hand and pulled herself upon his unsaddled back. His bridle had not been removed; she slipped the hitching-rein, and the next moment the creature was speeding away upon the hardening snow with a snort of delight in the keen frosty air. The sound roused the men brooding over the fire within.

"Who's that gone?" said the sheriff, suddenly lifting his head.

Not a man had left the room. In vague agitation the group rose uncertainly.

"Somebody's after them horses," suggested one.

There was a pell-mell rush to the door. A wild excitement of horses kicking and pawing at close quarters ensued in the shed. Then a sharp cry, "My horse! My horse is gone!" exclaimed the sheriff. "Some man has got my good gray horse!"

The moon was out again, — a chill glitter, and the earth very white; and on the brow of the hill, speeding toward Jepson's cabin, was visible a swift equestrian figure. A score of men, save one, were in the saddle. A wild halloo rang through the air, and then, with all the fervor of the chase kindling in their blood, they were in pursuit. When the moon was out it showed rank after rank of the wild mountain men of the region; when the moon was in, a mystic company of mounted shadows slipped noiselessly over the snow. Swift as they were, their speed would not avail. They did not gain on the fugitive. The long lengths of

glittering, moonlit snow or shadowy whiteness still remained the same between them and the sheriff's horse. It behooves an officer of the law in that country to be well mounted, and the iron-gray had no equal for speed or spirit. Only a bullet could be swifter, and presently one whizzed past. The gray horse had heard the like before, and plunged and snorted in fright. Another, — so close that it seemed to Marcella that it must have grazed her flying hair, all streaming backward in the wind of her flight, for she was bareheaded as she clung to the reins with one hand, with the other beating the horse with her sun-bonnet. The bullets served to accelerate his pace. The distance from the pursuers was widening. She came over the hill at a tremendous rush, and saw, to her joy, a light in Jepson's cabin.

It seemed to him at the time as if he were dreaming. He heard the thud of hoofs; he saw, as he opened the door, the equestrian figure reining up on the snow; he heard Marcella's voice beseeching him to fly, fly at once, for his enemies were upon his track; and then, straggling over the hill, came, one by one, the distanced pursuers. They had lost the fugitive long ago, but they noted, as she had done, the light in the cabin. As they approached, they saw Jepson advancing to meet them, — advancing boldly. His figure was very distinct in the light of the moon, which had shaken off its besetting clouds, and was crystal-clear in the sky, while the snowy earth responded with an opaque white lustre. His pose suggested all his arrogance. His arms were folded on his breast; his head was held very erect.

It was a frenzied impulse which animated them, for they did not connect him in any sense with the fugitive on the sheriff's horse. Perhaps it arose from the lack of a recognized head of the expedition, for the dismounted officer was still far behind at Strobe's house. They were wild, fevered, riotous, their minds still full of the suspicions bruited about the hearth this evening. Most of all, it may be, they felt that fierce, chafing wish to break away from control which

they had shared with every mob turning against its erstwhile leader. Jepson did not realize that he was reenacting the history of many a despot, when a sharp, whizzing sound split the night air, and he felt, in amazement, a keen tingle in his folded right arm,—another, striking above the elbow. Their aim was good for men who rode at full gallop.

He did not flee. He walked on, silent, proud, erect, toward them. They were upon him now, the smoking horses snorting and curveting as they closed about him, the earth seeming to shake beneath their hoofs; and suddenly this Cæsar of the Great Smoky Mountains sank down in the reddening snow.

No one knew afterward quite accurately who fired the shots. There were many mutual criminations and recriminations amongst the little mob, but the pistols were not available in evidence because of the frequent discharges at the fugitive on the sheriff's horse. These were considered justifiable, and thus the responsibility was never placed. Marcella was much reproved for her unwomanly interference in matters with which she had no concern. The sheriff, however, declared gallantly, "Ef I hed known 't war you-uns, Marcelly, I'd hev loant ye my horse an' welcome." And more than one of the pursuers averred that it was frightful to think of having had to fire off pistols at "leetle Marcelly Strobe by mistake, whilst she war a-skitterin' along on that wild-goose chase through the snow on the sher'ff's horse."

Jepson felt that it was a forlorn and maimed existence that stretched out before him after Dr. Boyce came and took off his arm. Physical prowess was a sort of religion with him, and he could not call to mind any Biblical worthy thus afflicted. It was well that he had so much pride and so much courage, or he might have been more white-faced and cast down than he was, one afternoon, when Mrs. Strobe and Marcella went to his cabin to inquire concerning his well-being. The girl persisted in sitting on the doorstep,

for the door stood open, the snow having melted and the air being fine and dry, and from his chair within, by the fire-side, he could not see her face, — only the lustrous waves of her long curling hair tossing on her shoulders.

When Mrs. Strobe, interested in a matter of horticulture, stepped out on the back porch to cull sundry seed-pods from a vine sheltered by the eaves, he boldly offered his advice on a point on which he considered it sorely needed.

"Ye mus' quit these hyar dangerous ways, Marcelly," he said, in his domineering tone. "Leave the men's affairs alone. Ye 'll git kilt some time. Ye mought hev been kilt kem'in' ter warn me, an' 't war powerful dangerous warnin' Rathburn."

"I reckon 't war n't none too much ter do fur a man I 'm goin' ter marry," she retorted tartly, her back toward him, her elbow on her knee, her chin in her hand.

He had grown used to the idea that she would marry Rathburn. "I wish he war a better man!" he said bitterly.

"He ain't got no religion, sca'cely, I know," she resumed presently, "but *he* don't feel no lack."

"He ain't a hypercrite, then, — like ye called me wunst?" he said desolately.

"Oh, yes," she declared lightly, "jes' about yer size of a hypercrite."

"Waal — I hope he 'll be good ter ye," he sighed.

"Dunno 'bout that, — he gits mad mighty easy," she responded cavalierly. "Tole me wunst ez he would never furgive me ez long ez he lived."

"Fur what?" Jepson demanded angrily.

She had risen from the doorstep. She was looking casually around, as if she were about to go. Her voice had sunk unaccountably. "Jes' kase I 'lowed it mought hev been him ez treated leetle Bob Bowles mean."

There was a pause. "Marcelly," he cried at last, "who be ye a-talkin' 'bout?"

"You-uns!" She turned away her scarlet cheek, then flashed a bright glance over her shoulder. "But I 'm mos' wore out tryin' ter git it inter yer head, — ye 'pear so sodden in folly."

And then she was off.

Rathburn had bitter reproaches for her. "I thought you would marry me — not Jepson. I thought you cared for me."

"I never knowed my mind," she admitted, "till that night whenst I hearn 'em plottin' agin him, an' seen he war in danger. *Then* I fund out mighty quick who I keered fur."

"I believe it will kill me," he declared.

"Oh, no, 't won't!" she reassured him. "I hev hearn fower or five young men say that very thing, an they air walkin' round in Brumsaidge now, well an' hearty, an' likely ter last a good while yit."

Mrs. Strobe was not surprised. "Whenst young gals gits ter talkin' 'bout 'despisin' handsome sinners with eyes blue an' deep ez a well,' thar 's apt ter be a heap o' foolishness in the wind." She earnestly counseled her granddaughter to wait until after an investigation of the cave was had, lest Jepson should be in some sort inculpated by the testimony which the dark and gruesome caverns might yield at last. "Ye could turn him off then," she argued, "ef ye ain't married ter him."

Her remonstrances had the unexpected effect of hastening the wedding. "I don't believe he hev done nuthin' underhand an' mean. An' I 'm willin' ter share ennythin' they kin prove agin him," Marcella declared.

The first superficial investigation of those unexplored underground recesses resulted in naught. There was then some delay while the sheriff secured and had brought from Colbury the requisite means for an extensive, safe, and efficient search, — lamps, ropes, etc. ; and by the time they were in readiness Rathburn was sufficiently recovered to be with,

the party. He was in high hopes of realizing his dreams of rich deposits of ore, and eagerly examined the rock about the opening of the cave and within its passages. The only "find" was a ghastly spectacle. Not so far down the gloomy aisles of the cave, half hidden by a great fragment of rock, and by it supported in an upright posture, was the skeleton of a young man, clad in tatters and shreds of brown jeans, his grasp still upon the handle of a hunting-knife held out straight before him, kept in position since its strong blade had pierced the heart of a great panther, now but a skeleton too, rampant, its claws and fangs fixed in the ribs where its savagery had dealt death. It was the simplest explanation of the mystery: the antagonists in this primitive duel — the hunter and the beast — had each perished because of the other. Keale had doubtless tracked the creature to the cave, rashly ventured within her den, and she had fought with the courage of desperation. There were the skeletons of the panther kittens, having died of starvation, perhaps, scattered about on the floor, but no indications of precious metal, no sign that this gaunt thing that once was the adventurous mountaineer had ever sought it, save that in his pocket was a bit of float identical with the specimen which had so long proved a lure to Rathburn. The secret where he had found it perished with him.

Its influences were hardly so fleeting. Many a long and thoughtful hour Rathburn pondered on Baintree's fate: innocent of the crime of which he was accused; tempted by his cowardly terror of it to commit its counterpart, which though failing had left him its legacy of remorse, its brand of Cain to bear as long as he should live. Never again came news of him to Broomsedge Cove, although Rathburn, with a condoning compassion, a certain sense of responsibility, remembering his own sordid schemes and their pitiless pursuit, which provoked Baintree's crime, and a wish to lift the weight which must oppress him, sought him far and wide.

Rathburn lost his desire for wealth ; somehow that bit of float, with all its unfulfilled promises, with all its inchoate curses, was a talisman to reconcile him to poverty. No one might know in after years, when he was notably one of the "poor collectors" of his profession, how strong a proclivity for gains at all hazards he had conquered. He never became altogether unworldly, however, and when he had returned to his appropriate place in the heart of a city he was easily consoled for Marcella's choice, and esteemed it in the nature of an escape ; for none could realize so well as he how the charming mountain flower would have lost grace and beauty, all its fascinations wilting, in the transplantation to an incongruous sphere. Nevertheless he suffers a pang occasionally — the finer æsthetic function of the heart — when he hears from Broomsedge Cove. Latterly it has been reported that Eli Strobe, whose mental malady has quite disappeared, has been elected justice of the peace, and that the "dad" formerly so frequent a word on Marcella's lips has become a stranger to her vocabulary ; for ever since she has solemnly spoken of him by the ambitious title of his office, as "the squair." Even while Rathburn laughed at this, he saw, with the vividness of reality, and a yearning pain like homesickness, the stretches of the tawny broomsedge waving over all the abandoned land ; the high encircling purple mountains touching the lofty sky ; the trees bowing in homage to the passing of the royal wind ; the river's silver gleam ; the smoke curling up from the stick-and-clay chimneys of the little hamlet, so still, so still, while above the white clouds set sail.







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